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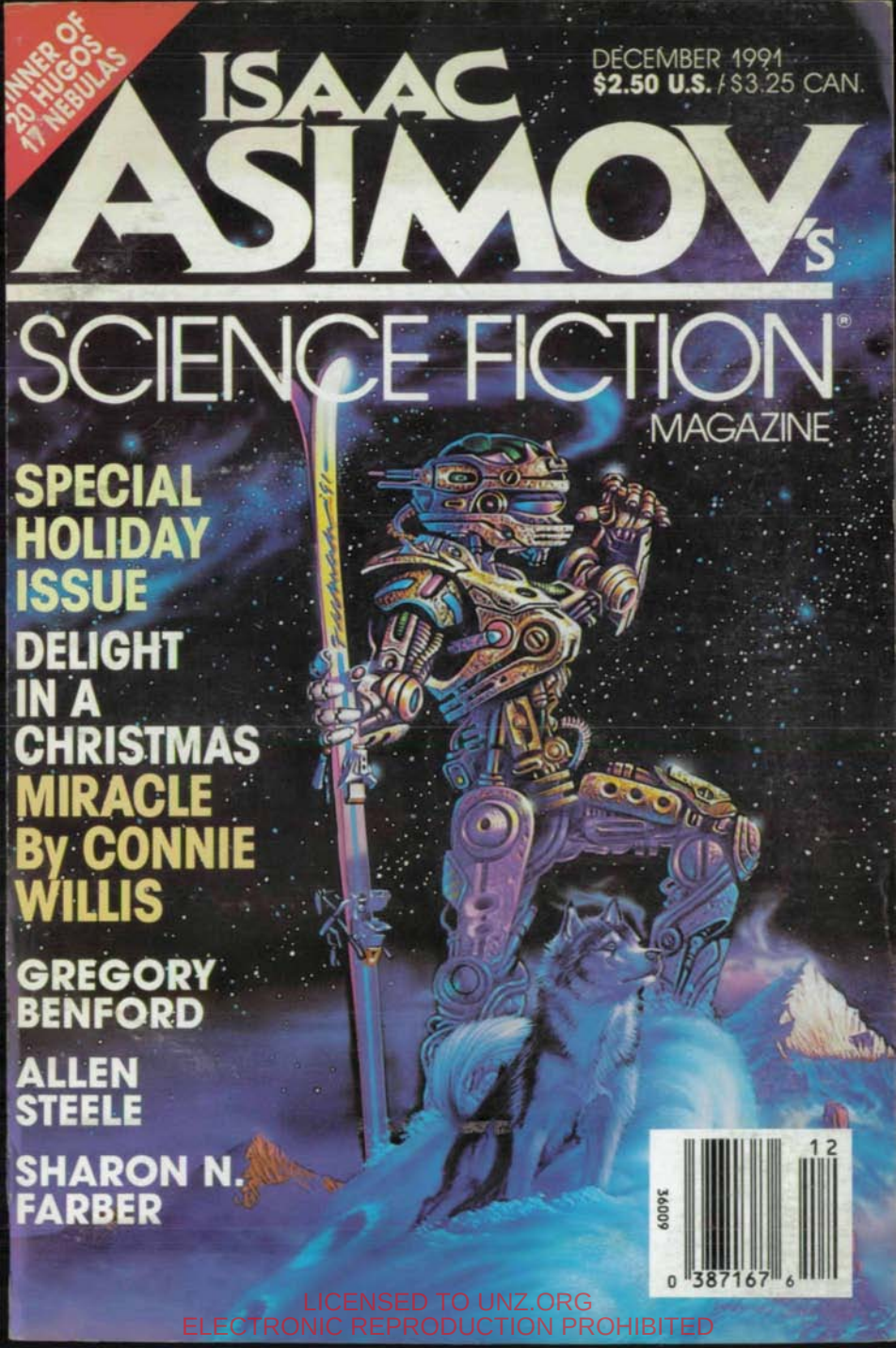

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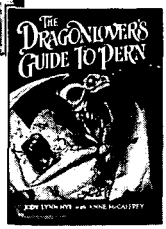

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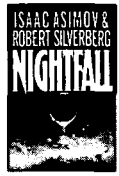

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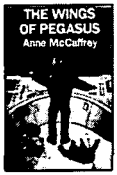

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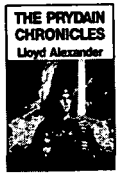

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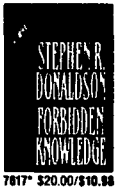

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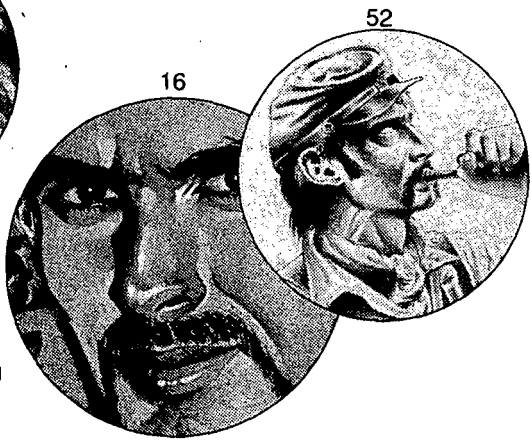

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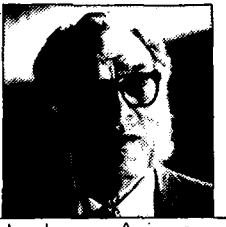
EDITORIAL



by Isaac Asimov

STRAIGHT LINES

We all have our faults and I, perhaps, have more than my fair share. One fault, which has frequently irritated those about me but which has given me incredible pleasure, is my utter inability to resist a straight line. A straight line is an ordinary remark which somehow has the ability to elicit a funny, or even a devastating rejoinder, and no straight line has ever passed me without such a rejoinder.

This flaw in my character hampered my school career and my professional career until I reached the point where the various things I did, however outrageous, were excused as charming eccentricity.

Anyway, you'll want examples, and I'll give you as many as there is room for.

I had lunch with Robert P. Mills, editor of *F & SF*, once long ago and when we left I automatically turned in a westward direction judging by the fact that in that direction there was no elevated railway in sight. What I did not realize was that since my last stop in that neighborhood the Third Avenue Elevated had been torn down.

Bob said, "You're going in the wrong direction, Isaac. You're heading toward Third Avenue."

"Really?" said I, thoughtfully. "Third Avenue reminds me of Christmas."

Since it was July, Bob was puzzled, and handed me the straight line I wanted. "Why?" he said.

"No El," I said, and Bob grew furious and went back to his office to write a special editorial denouncing me.

Then there was the case of Horace Gold, editor of *Galaxy*, who rejected a story of mine called "Profession" and did so with great contempt. (He was quite wrong, for I published it elsewhere to universal acclaim.) Horace, however, said it was meretricious. The word "meretricious" is from the Latin "meretrix," meaning "prostitute," so that the implication was that I was prostituting my talent, and was writing a bad story that would get by on my name because I was too lazy to write a good one.

Swallowing my annoyance, I said mildly, "What was that word you used, Horace?"

Obviously proud at knowing a word that I did not know, Horace fed me my straight line by enunci-

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ating carefully, "Meretricious!"

Whereupon I said, "And a Happy New Year to you."

He went up in flames and I don't think I ever saw him again. It was the end of a friendship, but I considered it worth it.

I was once telling a group of fellow-writers about my father's Talmudic homilies to me when I was little. I said, "My father used to say: Never hang around bums, Isaac. You may think you will make a decent person out of a bum, but you won't. Instead, he will make a bum out of you."

Whereupon Lester del Rey couldn't resist saying, "So how come you still hang around bums, Isaac?"

And I couldn't resist replying, immediately, "Because I love you, Lester." And even Lester had to laugh.

Of course, the person I most want to needle is Arthur C. Clarke. He is a dear and lovable fellow and he can take very good care of himself so we play the game of insult-and-response all the time. You have to know two things about Arthur to get the following story, however. First, our styles are sufficiently similar so that some people get our books confused. Second, one of his great triumphs is his book, *Childhood's End.*

So a woman approached me at a science fiction convention and said, "Dr. Asimov, I read your book *Childhood's End,* and I liked it but I didn't think it was nearly as good as any of your other novels."

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I would have given half my kingdom for a straight line like that and she had just handed it to me free of charge.

I stared at her solemnly, and said, "You are quite right, Madam. *Childhood's End* was a great disappointment to me. That is why I insisted it be published under the pseudonym of Arthur C. Clarke, Jr."

I nearly disrupted my internal organs trying not to laugh at that one. I suppose the only thing that would have made me happier was to have Arthur within earshot when I handled that straight line—but maybe it's better he wasn't. I might have died of excess joy.

My beautiful blonde daughter, Robyn, is a frequent recipient of my rejoinders. Recently, she did something I strongly disapproved of, and did so in my presence. I'll let her tell the story.

"As soon as I did it, I knew that you would be displeased, so I said, 'Do you mind, Daddy?' And you said, 'No, of course not, I don't mind' because that's what you always say, because you never criticize me. However, I paid no attention to what you were saying. I just looked at your face and I could see from that that you had just cut me out of your will and I was going to face a life of starvation and penury. So I quick undid what I did and looked at your face again and there I was, back in the will."

Later that day, still trying to recover from her near-escape from starvation and penury, she said to me, coaxingly, "You wouldn't ever drop me from your will, would you, Dad?"

And I put my arm around her and said, "Of course not, Robyn, darling. You're like a daughter to me."

Whereupon she crowed with laughter for quite a while.

I was curious, so I said, "Why did you think that was funny, Robyn?"

"I don't know," she gasped. "It's just that I'm used to your sense of humor. I grew up with it."

Well, she may have grown up with it, but she wasn't born understanding it.

In order to appreciate the following story, you'll have to understand something about my first wife, Gertrude. We didn't get along very well, but that didn't alter the fact that she was, and I knew she was, an extraordinarily good-looking woman. At her peak, she looked precisely like Olivia de Havilland at her peak. I happened to be in love (platonically) with Olivia de Havilland back in 1942, when I met Gertrude on a blind date. My eyes bugged at the vision and I was a doomed man from that moment.

Now imagine Robyn at the age of eight. She was blonde (there's blondness in my family even though my own hair was a dull brown until it became a dull gray) instead of brunette as Gertrude was, but the beauty was there in full measure (and still is.)

Robyn and I walked into our

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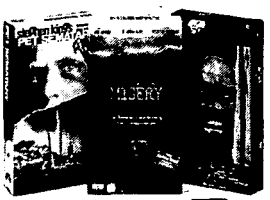

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town pharmacy, and the pharmacist, who had seen us separately, now saw us together for the first time and, not surprisingly, reacted in a kind of stunned way.

He said, "Is that beautiful little girl your daughter, Dr. Asimov?"

"Yes," I said, "and the odd thing about it is that my wife is even uglier than I am."

The pharmacist, who knew Gertrude, chuckled, but little Robyn, with eyes like saucers, set off homeward at a run.

I realized perfectly well what she was going to do and I started running after her to stop it.

I had no chance. She was eight and in perfect shape. I was forty-three and flabby. The whole neighborhood watched the pursuit over a track of three-fourths of a mile, and she got home first. "Mommy, Mommy, guess what Daddy said." And the little stinker told her.

Gertrude favored me with a hard glare, and I said, "Come on, Gertrude, I know you're beautiful, and you know, and everyone knows, but I just couldn't resist the straight line."

It did me no good whatever, and all I can say is that it's a pity I love Robyn so much because it suddenly strikes me that a few days of penury and starvation (merely a few days) might be just what she needs.

I try not to make my rejoinders openly sexual, but every once in a while, there is no holding back.

Only the other day, I was talking to two beautiful young women who happen to be my editors. (I've had more beautiful editors than you can imagine and I have never complained about it, either.)

In the course of our conversation I mentioned the name of a character in one of my books and I got it wrong and one of the editors corrected me. Very embarrassing, but she was right and I was wrong.

Still, when, a few moments later, the editor made a trivial mistake, using a slightly wrong word, I promptly corrected her. Then I said, "I wouldn't have bothered correcting you, dear, but you had just corrected me."

"I understand," she said, gravely, "It was just a case of tit for tat."

And I said, "If it's a case of tit for tat, wow, do you have the advantage over me."

At which the two young women looked at each other haughtily and said, "Listen to him laughing. He thinks it's funny."

You bet I thought it was funny. I laughed for quite a while. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Sir:

Does the artist for the cover of your February 1991 issue come from an alternate universe? The best I can judge the Empire State Building has been moved about five miles south of our universe's correct placement of West 34th St. and Fifth Avenue. Your artist seems to have it on top of the old U.S. Customs House. And is that the Chrysler Building I see replacing the World Trade Center?

And as for the story associated with this art, "Bright Light, Big City," any intelligent terrorist (is that an oxymoron?) would be better advised to place their homemade nuke on Staten Island, where, a mere fifteen-hundred feet from the ferry terminal, the Navy intends to base eight to eleven ships carrying nuclear weapons. The Aegis cruiser *Normandy* is already there, with about a hundred such weapons on board. A homemade nuke detonated nearby could create so much fallout cheaply that having the bomb outside Manhattan would make no difference. The fallout would contaminate far more than a Manhattan blast (in whichever universe) would destroy.

Loved the story, though.

Sincerely,

Thomas Wm. Hamilton

I don't think the February 1991 cover was meant as a literal map of New York City. It seems to me to be merely an impressionistic view giving someone the feeling of a large metropolis. We mustn't try to pin artists down too closely to the literal.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov;

All the talk about first person narrators not identifying their sex immediately, and the annoying problem resulting, reminds me of a particular story in your magazine that appeared some time ago. Not only did I guess the wrong sex, but also the wrong *sexual persuasion* as a result. I assumed a female character from a female author, a character that talked about boyfriends and acted in an effeminate manner. When over half way through the story, the character turned out to be *male,* I was completely jarred. Looking back through the story, there was no way to tell until the point that I had read to. I felt cheated in a way, that the author had intentionally set up a story that would pull the rug out from under my feet. The most bothersome aspect of the situation was that the story didn't deal with this surprise change of iden-

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tity at all, and in fact the plot would have been almost exactly the same with a female character to begin with.

It was hard to tell if the writer did this intentionally or not, or if I was the only reader affected so, but it brought up feelings of antagonism that were hard to suppress. I read stories with an open mind, but I think it is a bad idea to test the patience of a reader in so haphazard a fashion. I suppose it is good that I've forgotten who wrote it.

Reading and writing,

Jay Michael
Munster, IN

Oh, I don't know. A mystery writer does his level best, often, to hide the identity of the murderer. You come up to this perfectly decent human being who suddenly turns out to be a fiend. Do you feel cheated because of this? Do you really want everything in a story to be laid out so clearly that you never have a chance of finding out anything for yourself?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

There is a matter that has been very troubling to me (and I am certain to science fiction readers in general) for some time. This matter concerns the passing of many of the greats of science fiction from time to time and the recording, or lack thereof, of their deaths.

As a technical consultant, I have to travel internationally quite often and it has been solely due to this travel that I learn of the demise of a Science Fiction Great. Their deaths are reported in foreign newspapers and publications with refreshing frequency and respect. However, it is usually only by mere chance that the same can be said of the United States.

It was purely by chance that I learned of the passing of James Tiptree, Jr., Theodore Sturgeon, John Campbell and others. Like many today, I watch more television news than read newspapers when I am stateside and not traveling. And when I do get a chance to read the newspapers, it is very rarely the New York *Times*.

Dr. Asimov, if you were to pass on (hopefully not for a very long time), or Arthur C. Clarke or Ray Bradbury or even Gene Roddenberry and any of the *Star Trek* actors, I am quite certain that every major and non-major publication of any worth would carry the story. However, for the late Philip K. Dick and James Blish, this was not the case.

It is my opinion, Dr. Asimov, that we of the scientific and science fiction community must take care of our own. What I am suggesting is some sort of record in book form of all of those who fell in the battle to enlighten the minds of humankind. Also, Dr. Asimov, that you are the perfect man to start such a worthwhile ball rolling.

It would also not hurt if such a written record were accompanied by a series of photographs so that we can all see what these people looked like. Many of us do not have the option of time or financial status to attend every science fiction convention and meet most of the writers who do attend. Many of us buy soft cover editions of their

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works and these rarely include photographs of the authors. I think such a book, to be updated from time to time of course, would be a fitting and modest tribute to all those who have passed on.

Please question your readers on this matter. I am quite certain that you will find their response to be an overwhelmingly positive.

Respectfully yours,

Allen J. Duffis
Technical Consultant
New Preston, CT

As a matter of fact, there are science fiction news magazines (admittedly with a small circulation confined mostly to science fiction professionals) that carefully records all deaths, usually running appreciations from friends, together with photographs. If you subscribe to Locus *or* Science Fiction Chronicle *you will have what you want.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois,

I just finished reading Pat Murphy's novelette "Traveling West" in the February 1991 issue of *IAsfm,* and I loved it. Please publish more of Ms. Murphy's stories—especially if they are about Nadia.

I am also happy to learn that there will be another "Mama Jason" story by Janet Kagan soon. I enjoy these tremendously—in part because I am a biologist, I suppose; in part because Mama Jason's a neat character; and in part because Ms. Kagan's stories are humorous. I definitely appreciate stories that lighten my day after grading papers and dealing with college students who haven't prepared for their day's classes.

Thank you,

Emily Oaks
Hannibal, NY

Well, we keep finding new uses for the magazine. Obviously, there are cases where our stories keep teachers from going crazy. Considering the fact that American culture these days seems to put a premium on ignorance and illiteracy, anything we can do to keep teachers sane is a blow for the just and rational.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I just finished reading Michael Swanwick's colorful novel *Stations of the Tide* in the January issue of *IAsfm*. It was a thoroughly enjoyable novel and I was immediately struck by two thoughts. The first was, "Boy, would I like to have a briefcase like the Bureaucrat's." The second thought was, "I suppose that *IAsfm* is again going to be deluged by letters from readers objecting to the rather graphic sexual scenes."

Let me preface my comments by saying that I do not look for sexually explicit material in the books/stories that I read. I fully enjoy stories, such as yours, that contain little or no sex, graphic or otherwise; conversely, if the sexual activities of the characters in a story are important to the development of the story, I don't object.

I decided to preempt the objectors and to raise my voice in support of Mr. Swanwick now, rather than

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waiting to respond to those who will claim that pornographic material has no place anywhere, least of all in a science fiction magazine. Whether or not pornography should be allowed to exist is not a point I wish to debate, but I do disagree with anyone who claims that any explicit description of sexual activities is pornographic. I define pornography as erotic material that is presented for the expressed purpose of arousing, titillating, exciting, or otherwise stimulating the reader. It need not be good literature, have a point, or be particularly original. I think that few would argue that sex can, and often does, have a profound effect on people's lives. If an author feels that the plot can proceed the way necessary only through a major personal crisis or growth on the part of one of the characters and that the best or only way to inspire such deep changes are sexually driven personal experiences, then the sex moves beyond mere pornography.

In *Stations of the Tide,* if we analyze the impact of the explicit descriptions of the encounters between Undine and the Bureaucrat, we find that these are vital to the development of the Bureaucrat, and therefore, the plot. How else could we understand the Bureaucrat's sudden, almost overwhelming, passion for Undine and his consequent shift in values? It is through the process of really understanding the profound effect that their encounters had on the Bureaucrat that this becomes clear. Mr. Swanwick could have said, perhaps rather tritely, "She taught him things and showed him a passion in himself that he'd never known before." This would partially explain why the Bureaucrat felt the way he did, but it would in no way allow the reader to empathize with the Bureaucrat, nor would it explain his seemingly sudden betrayal of the system that he was responsible for protecting. Sharing their bedroom experiences provided a much more intimate and complete understanding of his feelings, motives, and subsequent actions.

To those who would object, let me say, "Pooh on you for being so narrow-minded, and if you don't like what you're reading, *don't read it!*" Stop bothering the rest of us with your complaints and stop trying to be the arbiter of our values. It is a thankless and fruitless task.

To the good people at *IAsfm,* keep up the excellent work.
Faithfully;

F.T. Podealuk
Burlington, Ontario
Canada

PS: I'm getting as tired of the complaints about sex as I am with the complaints about *IAsfm* containing stories that are not "hard" science fiction.

If we do get the letters you speak of (and I suppose we will) we will have your letter in advance as a counterpoise. That is very convenient for us.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I'd like to thank Norman Spinrad for his review of my novel *Cortez On Jupiter.* He saw what I was

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doing and did an excellent job of explaining it. It is an honor to be pointed out as a link between Latin American and North American magic realism.

I'd also like to state that despite my name, I AM A CHICANO! Lots of Chicanos and other Hispanics have Irish names; so do a lot of black people, Asians, and Native Americans; the Irish do a lot of splashing around in the global gene pool. I'm both a Latin American and a North American. It's where I live, what I live—that's why I write about it.

In Latin America, science fiction and magic realism have been linked for a long time, in the works of René Rebetez and other authors whose work, sadly, is not available in English—yet! Most Latin American SF writers are just as influenced by Jorge Luis Borges as they are by Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov. It's a different world—another world to explore.

If any readers are interested in seeing the interface between science fiction and Latin American magic realism from the other side, in English, I suggest Carlos Fuentes's *Christopher Unborn,* about Mexico in an alternate 1992.

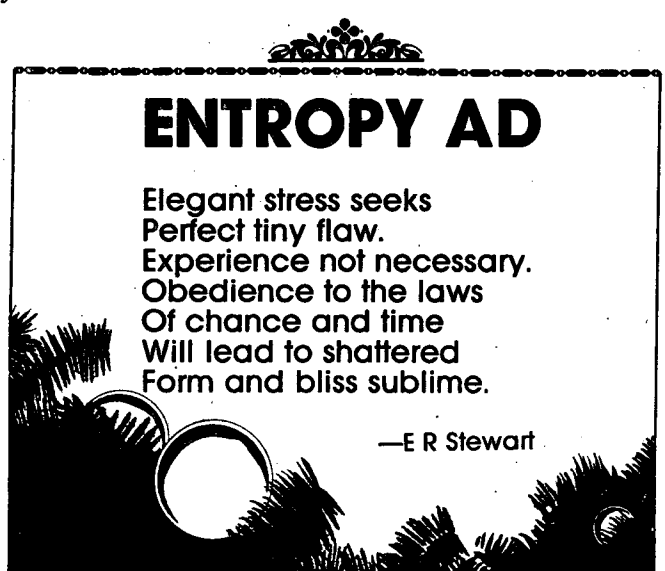
Meanwhile: Free Salman Rushdie!

Ernestly,

Ernest Hogan
Phoenix, AZ

As you point out, genes are all mixed up, so that they can't very well be used as racial markers. I suppose that what counts is cultural heritage, which lends humanity a wide and interesting variety. Now if we can only get used to thinking of cultural varieties as different, but not unequal—

—Isaac Asimov



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SECOND COUSIN TWICE REMOVED

by Cynthia Felice

Cynthia Felice is the author of nine books. Some of her recent publications include *The Khan's Persuasion; Light Raid* (written in collaboration with Connie Willis); and her latest novel, *Iceman*, which has just been released in paperback by Ace Books. Ms. Felice's short fiction has appeared in *Omni, Galileo*, and *Universe*. Her heartwarming Christmas tale of a "Second Cousin Twice Removed" is her first story for *IAsfm*.

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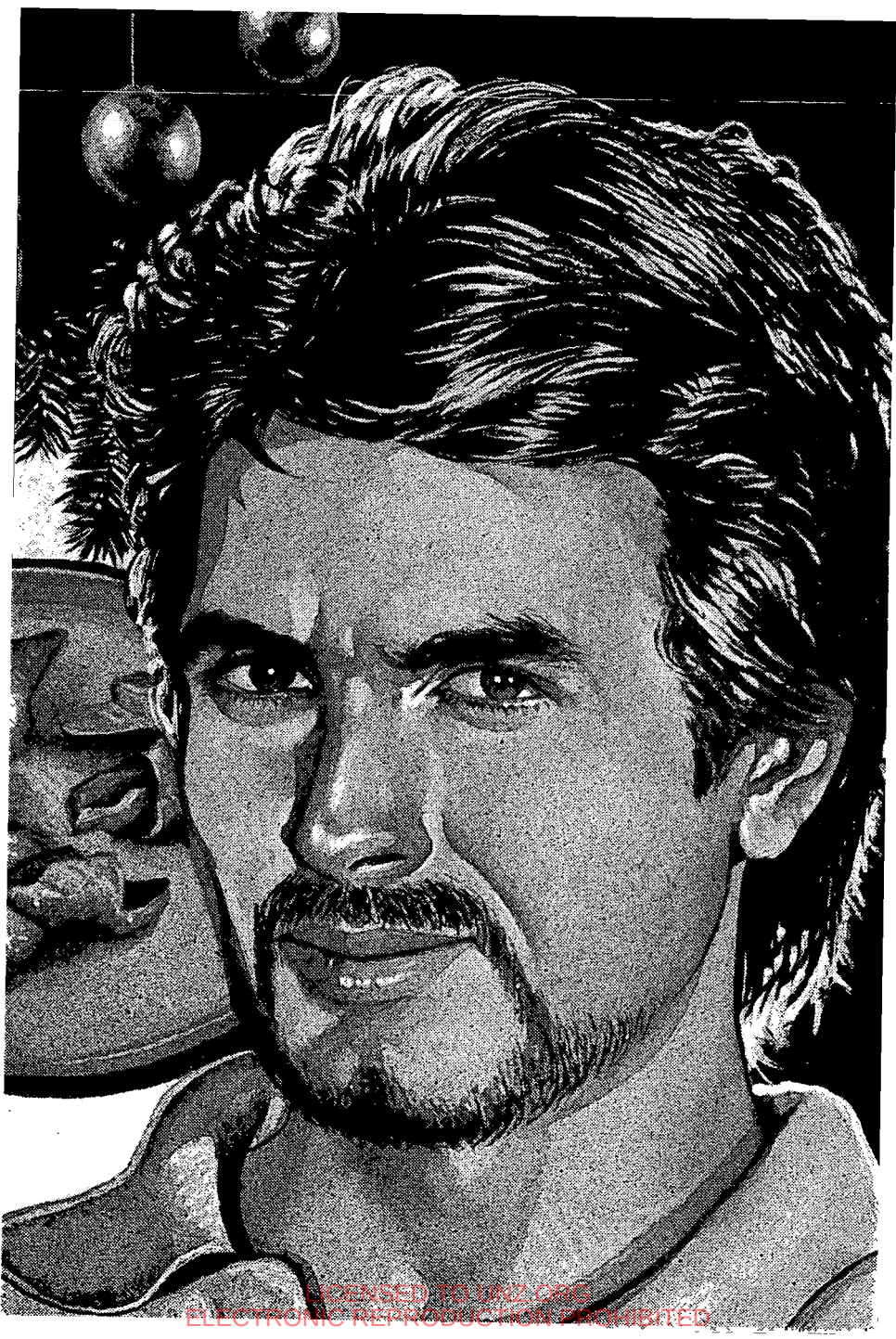

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Four cars were already blocking the driveway when I got back from shopping and it was only four o'clock. The Christmas Eve party had started at six P.M. for about twenty years now, but ever since Tony and Paul and all their friends got driver's licenses there're a few cars in the driveway no matter what time it is. I parked in the street, got my shopping bags out of the back seat, and hurried through the cold to the house. The door flew open and I rushed inside. The aroma of the ham baking was gratifying.

"Merry Christmas, Jenny." The door slammed and my brother-in-law Mario put his arms around me for a hug. He was wearing a red sweater with epaulets and an emblem, which combined with silver-gray hair and the handsome DeRose features to give him a distinguished look, sort of like a retired general. He reached for the shopping bags. "For me?" he asked. "You shouldn't have." Then he hefted them and gave me a puzzled look. For such big sacks they were deceptively light.

"Ornaments," I said as I shoved my coat in the closet. I was still in jeans and a sweatshirt and wishing now that I'd thought to shower and dress before I ran out to the St. Nick store. "For the tree."

"You don't have enough Christmas ornaments? Why didn't you say something? Lillian must have fifty boxes of Christmas junk in the attic."

"You got new ornaments?" Lillian said, coming out of my living room into the foyer. My sister-in-law's eyes were twinkling with anticipation as she hugged me. "For a special occasion? Merry Christmas, and *happy anniversary.*"

"Jen, is that you?" My husband Sal stuck his head out from the kitchen. His glasses were greasy and there was a dusting of flour across his nose. "Where have you been? You still haven't made the *scalliels* and the kids are downstairs listening to music when they should be decorating the tree, and everyone's already arriving. Do I have to do everything around here?"

Before I could answer I heard the thunder of teen feet pounding in the stairwell. "Mom, tell him that you *ordered* us not to decorate the tree until you got back," Paul was shouting before he was halfway up the stairs. "And that I already cleaned the downstairs bathroom once today, and that I *am* helping by sorting the Christmas records." As he reached the top of the stairs his hand darted out to the countertop that was filled with platters of cookies. He popped something into his mouth, probably an island jewel shortbread cookie to judge by the smudge of powdered sugar on his lips. "Someone didn't put them back in their jackets, just jammed them in the case," Paul mumbled.

Paul was seventeen, still young enough to think I couldn't possibly remember I told him to clean up downstairs after last year's Christmas

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Eve party, which meant putting away the Christmas albums. His buddies reached the top of the stairs, all of them in dress pants and whole shirts, quite a change from the T-shirts and jeans held together with safety pins they usually wore. Three of them I knew; two of them were strangers, which was not at all unusual. Paul always seemed to have some young friends who needed somewhere to be on Christmas Eve. The boys were eyeing the cookies.

"This is Jerry," Paul said, sticking his thumb in the chest of the closest blond boy. "You know Brian, Todd, John, and, of course, Dominick."

"Have *one*," I said, smiling at the boys and knowing that at this hour an open invitation to teenagers could result in weeks of baking being devoured before the rest of the guests even arrived. I took the shopping bags from Mario and handed them to Paul. "You and your brother can start the tree now; use these. When you're done, put towels in the downstairs bathroom, the good ones."

"Tony's in the shower," Paul said. He'd shifted the two light bags into one hand and started pulling tissue paper off of the top layer of ornaments. "They're all silver."

"That's because it's our silver anniversary today." I said as I shoved up my sleeves and started for the kitchen. One of the young men stepped out from behind Paul.

"Hi, I'm Dominick. You must be Aunt Jenny. You weren't expecting me but you always said anyone who can come should come."

He was obviously a DeRose; he had the big brown eyes and that little dent that some of the DeRoses have at the corner of their left eye, and he smiled like a DeRose. He wore whiskers, a bit thin and not enough to hide that shy winsome grin. "You're welcome, of course. Did you fly in?" I asked, and I was trying to figure out if he was Angelo Peroni's grandson or Elmo Ranalli's, which would narrow him down to about one hundred and fifty people. The DeRose girls each had ten children, and their brother, my father-in-law, had thirteen. I knew most of Sal's cousins, but keeping track of their children was almost impossible.

"Not exactly," he said. "I've been at school."

"Does this mean I can't hang my pink baby in the manger ornament that I made in first grade?" Paul said, his big brown eyes glittering with mock disappointment.

"That's what it means," I said.

"Jen!" Sal shouted from the kitchen.

I patted Dominick on the cheek. "We'll talk later," I said, and he smiled and nodded.

"Come on, Dom," Paul said, gesturing toward the living room. "What are you to me anyhow, a second cousin?"

I didn't hear his answer because Sal was talking to me again even

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before I got into the kitchen. "New ornaments?" he asked. "You left me here to finish cooking for a hundred people to buy ornaments for the tree when we have five boxes of ornaments in the shed?" He was shaking his head, wiping floured fingers on the apron he had over his T-shirt and jeans. Even so, I could tell he was touched. When your anniversary is the 24th of December, you can't really celebrate; Christmas takes precedence. He gave me a peck and handed me the measuring cup. I put it down.

"I told her she could borrow some from us," Mario said. He'd followed me into the kitchen. "Lillian has a jillion."

"Oh, it's going to be pretty," Lillian said, coming in from the living room. "Silver bells, white sparkly snowflakes, even little mirror ones, and where did you ever find those silver garlands? They're so fat and fluffy."

"You saw them all already?" I asked. The kitchen was a mess. Sal was obviously about to tackle the *scalliels* on his own; he had the big can of Crisco but the wrong dutch oven on the stovetop next to the split pea soup, which was boiling too hard. At least the mixing bowl was clean and ready. I turned down the flame under the soup.

"Paul dumped the shopping bags out on the floor," Lillian said. "But it's all right; nothing broke. The store wrapped them nicely. I just moved some of it so they wouldn't step on them while they put the lights on the tree and I peeked at some of them. They're beautiful, Jen."

I put the dutch oven back in the cabinet and pulled out the sixteen-quart pot and started scooping the Crisco into it. "We've never had new ornaments," I said. "We got some from Mama DeRose and my mother for our first Christmas, and then someone gave me grandma's. This is the first time I've ever bought ornaments in my whole life. It was fun. And I figured that since we never celebrate our anniversary in the traditional sense, it would be nice to do something a little bit special for our silver one."

The doorbell rang, and Sal shouted for Paul to answer it.

"Could it be Annette and Benny?" I asked.

"No, they called again just after you left," Sal said. "They're still stuck on the ground in Chicago. They can't get the runways cleared. The airlines aren't making any promises, but Benny said some flights were getting out, so they were still hoping."

"Gemma and Don made it in; I talked to Marc and Kathy just before we left the house," Lillian said. Gemma and Don were from the California contingent converging on us this Christmas. "They'll be over just as soon as Gemma gets changed." She looked at the lard melting in the pot. "You aren't making *tordills* at this hour, are you?"

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"*Scalliels*," Mario said loudly. "My sister-in-law knows my Christmas wouldn't be complete without *scalliels*."

"Should have made them yesterday," Sal said, peeking in the oven at the ham. Ham really doesn't need any attention, but Sal checks it about every hour anyhow. "How am I supposed to bake the rolls?"

"That," I said, "is what you should have made yesterday. The *scalliels* only taste good when they're fresh." I was wishing I'd made them this morning as I'd planned, but I'd gotten behind.

"Hey, Mom!" Paul shouted from the living room. "Can I start decorating the tree, or do I have to wait for Tony?"

"The ham can come out at five-thirty and I'll bake off your rolls then," I said, and to Paul, I shouted, "Get started. He'll help you when he gets out of the shower."

"How come I had to wait for him to come home from college to trim the tree but I don't have to wait for him to get out of the shower?"

I just shook my head, but Lillian figured it out. "Was Tony disappointed last year that you hadn't waited for him?"

"He said he wasn't, but I think he was. Have you seen Bridgette yet?"

"Yes, she's here. I think she's still downstairs working on the albums with the other girls."

"Girls?" I asked.

"Angie and Sara. I think they came with Brian. And you'll get to meet Matt Kelly tonight, Valerie's new boyfriend. I think it's serious this time."

I was looking for the eggs. I'd left them on the counter before I went shopping because they're supposed to be room temperature, but the countertops were so cluttered with trays of food and dirty bowls that I couldn't see them. I reminded Lillian that I'd met Matt Kelly after a football game last fall and I think she said something about that not counting because Valerie hadn't been dating him at the time, or maybe she told me they'd been dating and broken up and made up since then. One of the problems I have with Christmas Eve is that I'm always doing something and I never really get to talk with anyone. I love my niece and I like knowing what's going on in her life, but I only manage to get snatches of important information on Christmas Eve because my concentration is divided between conversation and whatever I'm doing.

I found the eggs in the refrigerator just as Valerie and Matt Kelly arrived. Thankfully they hadn't cooled down yet. The eggs, I mean. I cracked the full dozen into a mixing bowl and added one cold one from the other carton because that's what I'd seen my mother-in-law do. I'd baked with her several times so that I could write down the recipes—"A handful of dis, a spoonya of dat"—and sometimes she'd dump the handful into the bowl before I really got to see how much, and she never used

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measuring spoons. We'd probably made the *scalliels* on Christmas Eve, because despite my notes, mine were never quite as good as hers. They tasted okay, but the dough was awful to handle and they fried up with funny splits in the crust that hers never had. I was determined to follow the recipe carefully this time, carefully measuring four teaspoons of anise extract, which she had just poured from the bottle onto the pool of eggs. Clever me had marked the bottle and measured the amount later. I didn't think the anise extract was the problem. I hated making them because they wouldn't turn out right. I must have said something like that out loud.

"I thought you liked *scalliels*," Dominick said.

Sal was peeking in the oven again ahead of schedule, and Lillian was gone. "I do like them," I said looking around for the measuring cup. "I just can't make them right." The cup was perched on a stack of holly patterned paper plates right where I left it and I plunged it into the flour bag. "My dough is always sticky, and Grandma's . . . I mean your great Aunt Pietra's wasn't. Half of it will end up on my fingers instead of in the cookies."

Dominick was leaning over the bowl of eggs, sniffing the aroma of the anise. "I love *scalliels*," he said as he watched me pour the first cup of flour in.

"You and your Uncle Mario," I said.

"My dad likes them, too," he said.

"And Paul," I added as I reached for the blender. You had to mix the flour as it was added, or the dough might get lumpy. I'd solved that problem a few years ago, but it still wasn't *right*.

"What about the Crisco?" Dom asked me.

"It's melting in the pot on the stove," I said.

"No, I mean in the batter, er, dough. Whatever you call it. Doesn't some go in with the eggs?"

"Hey, Tony, are you out of the shower yet?" Paul shouted from the living room. "I've got a broken string of lights."

I was staring at the yellow mass of eggs and in my mind's eye I could see a lump of Crisco floating in the center. I could almost hear my mother-in-law's voice saying, "To maka da dough nice-ah," as she dumped it off the slotted spoon into the eggs.

"How'd you know about the Crisco?" I asked him, amazed. I looked at Dominick, fully confident that the Crisco was the missing ingredient. It was like an epiphany.

"I used to watch my grandmother make them," he said, smiling that big grin that Paul and Tony always use when they've done something they're pleased about.

"I need some help with these lights," Paul shouted.

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"Tony's still in the shower," Sal shouted back. His head and shoulders were in the refrigerator.

"I'll help him," Dominick said.

I hadn't known that Renata Peroni or Loretta Ranalli made *scalliels*; I'd always believed the *scalliels* were something my mother-in-law had brought with her from her village. At least, hers were the only ones I'd ever eaten during those Christmases back in Chicago when we were young. I didn't much care; they'd turn out all right this time, I was sure. I scooped some Crisco into the eggs, and I had the best feeling about it floating there.

The doorbell rang again, and Bridgette came into the kitchen and hung around long enough to help me roll the *scalliels*. The dough was not sticky. It was nice, and none at all stuck to my palms. Bridgette helped me fry them in the hot Crisco, and by then it was almost time for the ham to come out of the oven. Bridgette was a great kid, already practically a member of the family. She and Tony had been dating since they were in high school, and she had been telling me about her classes at the community college as we watched the cookies turn golden brown in the hot lard.

"Hey, Mom. What do you want on the top of the tree?" It was Tony shouting this time.

"The star, honey," I said.

"What star?" Paul shouted.

"The one in the shopping bag."

"The shopping bags are empty," Paul shouted.

I handed my apron to Bridgette and went into the living room. Paul and Tony were picking up tissue paper, stuffing it into the shopping bags. "Are you sure . . ."

"Yes, Mom, I'm sure there's no star in the bag. I checked myself before we started picking up," Tony said.

I was dismayed. Tony could be trusted to have checked thoroughly. "The clerk must have forgotten to put it in the bag," I said. "You'll have to go get it."

"It's ten to six," Tony said, shaking his head.

"We can just put up the old blue angel," Paul said, "and my pink manger." He grinned.

The tree looked like a jewel, all the ornaments not just shiny but new, every one of them hand picked by me in the celebration of this night. The garland was thick, and draped so neatly I was sure Tony must have done that part. I didn't want the old blue angel on the top, I wanted my star. "You'll have to hurry down to the St. Nick store," I said firmly.

"What if I don't get the right one?"

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"The clerk had it wrapped; she probably just forgot to put it in the bag."

"She's not going to give it to *me*," Paul protested.

"Tell her you're my son," I said. "Just tell her the lady who bought all the silver and white ornaments; she'll give it to you."

"But . . ."

"Come on," Dominick said. He'd been digging in the shopping bag. "I've got the receipt. I'll go with you."

Dom and Paul left, I went back into the kitchen to help Sal with the ham and to start baking off the rolls, and then ducked out to the bedroom to get changed. The doorbell was ringing in earnest, now, and the phone, too. I was glad Dom had cut off Paul's protests. The store was only five minutes away, and having an anniversary tree, complete with silver star, was small enough tribute to twenty-five years with Sal.

"The tree looks real pretty," he said when he breezed back into the bedroom for a belt and a shirt. "What made you think of new ornaments?" He'd managed a shower, but his glasses were still greasy. I took them off his face and polished them with the hem of my slip.

"You, silly," I said. "Happy anniversary. Did the kids get back with the star?"

He nodded. "Dom—is he a Ranalli or a Peroni?" he asked, and I shrugged. "Anyhow, Dom slipped something under the tree. There's already half a dozen packages there."

They always asked if they could bring something, a plate of cookies or a salad, and we always said no. As much as Sal complained about all the work, as harried as we got on the big day, all the baking and the cooking was ours. We wanted it that way, we loved it that way. I guess people sensed it, because the gifts they left under the tree were tokens of sentiment and never so extravagant that we'd have to remember who gave what. Indeed, a lot of them didn't even have tags.

"Bridgette wrote everyone's name on the white board," Sal said as I slipped on my red dress and stepped into a pair of heels. "Counting babies and Benny and Annette, there really is going to be over one hundred people. One hundred and one, to be exact." He seemed rather pleased. It always felt like a hundred, but most years it was really only about fifty or sixty people. This year no one had gone out of town for the holidays. Everyone was coming, maybe because it was our silver anniversary.

"Any word from Benny?"

"Hey, Mom," Paul shouted through the closed door. "Uncle Ben is on the phone."

"I'll get it," I said, leaving Sal to find a shirt.

Dominick was holding the phone, his hand over the receiver. "Don't tell them I'm here," he said. "I want to surprise them."

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I nodded and talked to Benny, who explained they were still snowed in at the airport, couldn't even get home, let alone to us. Chicago was in the grips of a full blown blizzard, and we, of course, didn't have so much as a flake of snow. I put Mario on the phone so that Benny could repeat the whole story to him and pulled the first batch of rolls out of the oven.

"Expecting over a hundred people," I heard Sal saying to Lloyd Montgomery, one of his writer friends who had just arrived.

"Ninety-nine," I corrected.

"Benny and Annette?" Sal asked.

I nodded and pointed to the phone. I greeted Lloyd and ducked past a crush of kids to look at the tree. The silver star was on top and the living room was already full of people. I went to take over greeting from Tony; Paul was nowhere to be seen, and neither was Dom. Jill Murphy and her family had arrived. Jill and Paul had been dating since last summer, but I knew that they'd broken up again just a few days ago. There'd been some question in my mind about whether or not the Murphys would come tonight, but I guess the elder Murphys' good sense prevailed. Susan Murphy confided that if the two young people didn't make up tonight, they probably would tomorrow, and she wasn't going to miss this party for anything. Jill had laughed, but it wasn't her pretty laugh. It was kind of embarrassed.

When Sal and I were slicing the ham, I found Dom on my elbow. "Would you introduce me to Paul's girlfriend?" he asked me.

Paul, of course, was nowhere around to do the honors. "In a minute," I said. I had my hands full of ham fat scraps, but was realizing they weren't going to fit safely in the already overstuffed trash. Dom whisked it out from under me and dashed for the garage door. I stood there with my hands full greeting Maria and Bill along with their brood, followed by Marc and Kathy and theirs, and Gemma and Don. Most of the guests were Christmas Eve seasoned veterans, and they wound their way through the kitchen bumping and tasting on their way downstairs to the punchbowls. Dom returned with the empty trash can.

"What happened to the piñon pine?" he asked me.

"What piñon pine?" I asked right back as I dumped the scraps. I tore a paper towel from the rack.

"The one outside the back door," he said.

"You've got our house mixed up with someone else's," I said. "We've been meaning to plant trees for years, but we've just never gotten around to it."

"Oh," he said, backing up and right into Jill. Jill squealed.

"Jill, this is Dominick. He's Paul's second cousin, twice removed. Or is it three times removed?"

Dom shrugged, looking bland and indifferent as he shook hands with

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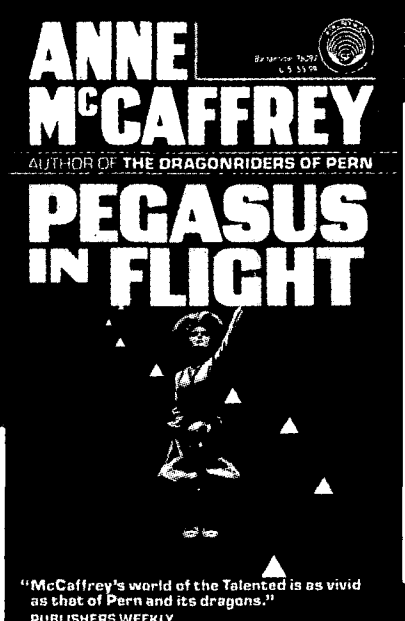
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Jill, not at all like she was someone he'd just asked to meet only minutes ago.

Jill moved on past us, encountering some of the boys before she got to the stairwell, and she laughed all the way down the stairs.

"Paul's girlfriend?" Dom said hopefully.

"You just met her," I said, gesturing back to the stairwell. "Jill Murphy. That's her laughing. You can always tell Paul's girlfriends by their laughs. Jill's is pretty, the girl before that had a hearty one, and they all have had great smiles."

"Bridgette has a great smile," he said.

I scooped the first batch of rolls into a basket. "She's Tony's girlfriend," I said.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "She looks just like her picture."

"Who has pictures of Bridgette?" I asked. Generally I sent only pictures of the family, but of course anyone visiting from Chicago could have caught Bridgette on film any time over the last four years. We already thought of her as a daughter. Tony only needed to make it legal now, but if he'd just wait until he finished college, please, God.

"Jen, the Eastmans are here," Sal said, beckoning me over, and of course the oven timer went off, too. The next batch of rolls were ready.

I swapped out baking sheets, and went to greet the Eastmans, Garret and Madeline, their teen daughters Regina and Mora, and of course baby Nicole. Nicole was walking now, wearing a little red coat with white fuzzy trim. Madeline was trying to take it off, but the toddler was having none of it. She just stared up at the crush of people, her eyes wide with amazement. When her coat was unbuttoned, she hugged herself so that it wouldn't come off when Madeline tugged. For the moment, her mother gave up and got up from her knees to hug me. Madeline Eastman and her family give the best hugs. Long hugs that seem to envelop me, hugs that engage me from my nose to my toes, and I get to do it four times. Unfortunately little Nicole was having none of it, not yet.

"Don't you want to take off your coat, honey?" I asked her. She reached for her mother, but then pulled back when she realized Mom was trying for the coat.

"In a minute," Madeline said easily for Nicole. And to me, "Oh, Jen, the tree is beautiful. I can't believe that with everything else you do at Christmas you also did *this*." She had stepped over to the tree to see some of the ornaments more closely. "Look at the tiny little birdnest made of silver wire. Oh, Garrett, did you see?"

The tree really was magnificent. That bushy old thing I'd bought at the Ben Franklin when Tony was a baby had been transformed into something magical. "The boys decorated it," I said.

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"Tony and Paul didn't pick out all these wonderful things," Madeline said with a laugh.

The phone rang, but someone else answered it. The doorbell rang and Paul's friend Lenny Washington walked in before anyone could open it just like he always did when he knew Paul was expecting him. His folks were behind him. I excused myself from the Eastmans to greet the Washingtons, and then Bridgette's folks arrived and I managed to get away from the door for a while to get the rolls out of the oven. From the corner of my eyes, I saw Paul staring into the linen closet, which I thought was peculiar. He saw me watching him.

"They need towels in the downstairs bathroom," Paul said pulling out the rattiest ones I owned.

"Not those," I said. "The good ones."

"These don't have any holes or . . ."

I snatched them out of his hand and shoved them back on the shelf. I pulled the good ones off the shelf and handed them to him.

"You don't have to get mad," he said.

"I'm not angry, but it's just about this time on Christmas Eve I do start going a bit mad."

"Huh?"

"Never mind," I said. "Take the towels down."

He turned to go and then paused. "Oh, yeah, Dom needed to borrow a CD. He was showing Nicole how to pop them out, and when she tried it, she popped the one he had in the machine right into the fireplace. I gave him your *Best of Carly Simon* album."

"He likes Carly Simon?" I asked.

"I don't think so. He just wanted an old one. He said he'd give it back at the end of the evening."

In answer to my *but why* look, Paul just shrugged and disappeared with the towels. I went back to making sure there were enough plates and holly-stamped paper napkins before I told everyone they could start eating.

While the guests fill their plates, Sal and I always stand by to explain what they're eating. They had the split pea soup and the ham figured out, but there were regular dinner rolls as well as rye, Swedish limpa and sheepherder's bread, condiments from all over the world, a new vegetable dip that Sal had created, and of course the Italian cookies: *Quaresemali, tordills, biscotti d'anice* and this year first-rate, just like Mama DeRose used to make them, *scalliels*, iced with powdered-sugar frosting, and fresh. The taste of anise is light, the cookie just about melts when it touches the tongue. Mario was back for thirds, which was fine because a baker's dozen of eggs makes a lot of *scalliels*.

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"Now is Dominick a Peroni or a Ranalli?" Mario asked me, "and whose kid is he?"

"I haven't figured it out yet," I said.

Mario seemed surprised.

"Talk to Paul. I overheard him asking Dom, but I didn't hear the answer."

Mario nodded and bit into another *scalliel.* "Best batch you've ever made," he said as he went to find Paul.

"I never saw so much food," Dorothy Washington said, "and believe me, my family can eat. But then I know you know that; you've had Lenny for dinner as much as I've had Paul. Now what are these?" she asked me, pointing to the island jewels, one of the few non-Italian cookies we make.

It takes quite a lot of time to explain the food, and Sal, who rightfully takes credit for most of the baking, loves every minute of it. Every year he tells the story of the time when he set the bread dough to rise on the chair nearest the radiator, then returned to working on a set of page proofs and sat down on the rising loaf, and every year it gets a big laugh. If we're lucky, Sal and I get to have some soup before it's time to make sure there's coffee for everyone. This year was going to take two urns full, and there was only one urn.

The Magindins and the Terrocos always came after Mass, but they were in time to see Tony and Paul re-marry Sal and me in honor of our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Although the kids had obviously planned this surprise carefully, we didn't exactly repeat our vows. When Tony played the part of the minister, he asked Sal to promise to give his sons unlimited use of the gas charge card, and Paul wanted us to vow never to look at the clock when he came in. We didn't make any promises. But we did hear Tony and Paul say they loved us in front of almost a hundred witnesses, which turned us to mush for at least the next hour. When the mock wedding was over Sal and I sat together on the sofa holding hands for the longest time. Finally he got up to refill the punch-bowl and Dom plopped down beside me.

"Would you show me the family tree you've been working on?" he asked me.

"How did you know about the family tree?" I'd sent off to *Reader's Digest* for a family tree form, and I'd filled in some of the blanks but most of them were still empty.

"Someone mentioned it, and family trees are something I'm interested in," he said. I guess I still looked puzzled because he added, "It's for a class." I looked around for a minute. No one needed another cup of coffee, and everyone looked to be engaged in conversation. I'd take a respite and

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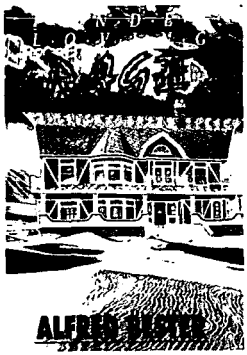

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maybe use the time to find out what school Dom was going to, not to mention find out exactly who he was.

"Come on, then," I said. "It's in Sal's study, which is an absolute mess, so you have to close your eyes."

Actually Sal's study looked fairly neat compared to normal. The stacks of manuscripts and books were not put away, but he'd squared the corners and lined them up. The PC was even dusted.

One drawer in his filing cabinet is devoted to household matters, and I keep odds and ends in it, too. While I was looking for the family tree file, Dom went over to the closet and looked inside, not at the clothes but at the inside wall.

"These are Tony and Paul's height recordings," he commented.

I found the family tree file and pulled it out of the drawer. "Who told you about those?" I asked him.

"I spent a lot of time with my grandmother," he answered easily. He was looking closely at the marks—just pencil lines I'd made by laying the pencil on the tops of Tony and Paul's heads, then I'd scratch it in and add the date and their names. It was fun when the boys were little and the marks had been very close together. The last few years I was lucky to get one measurement a year, and Sal had been upset with me when I refused to let him paint over the marks when we re-did the study. Then Dom looked at me, and I guess I had a perturbed look on my face. "Sorry," he said hastily. "I guess guests shouldn't be looking in closets."

"It's all right," I said. "A few of your cousins are marked there, too. The little ones get a kick out of seeing if they're as tall as Tony or Paul when they were the same age."

He nodded, smiled and nodded again. Dom started to close the closet door, then hesitated. "Would you mark me?" he asked.

I laughed. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five," he answered sheepishly.

I laughed again, but I admit I found it kind of charming. "Let me find a pencil," I said, going over to Sal's desk. By the time I had the pencil in hand, Dom was standing with his shoulder blades against the wall, nose to nose with the sleeve of Sal's old hunting jacket. "Take off your shoes," I said.

"Oh, I forgot," he said, and slipped off his shoes.

I handed him the file while I measured, and then motioned him aside so I could write in the date and his age. I started to write his name. "Now are you a Ranalli or a Peroni?" I asked, but the room was empty. I picked up his shoes and went back to the living room. Dom was sitting with Mario and Gemma, showing them the family tree form.

"Your shoes," I said, handing them to him.

Dom looked up and smiled. "Thanks."

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"Jen, I didn't know you were doing this," Mario said, gesturing to the family tree.

And Gemma said, "How come my kids aren't on here?" pointing to the empty lines under her and Don's names.

"I couldn't remember their birthdays," I admitted. "I meant to ask you, but I always forget."

"Give me a pen," Gemma demanded. "We have half the family here tonight. We can fill it in."

I got Gemma a pen, and now Marc and Kathy were hanging over her shoulder watching her write in date after date. She stopped.

"I don't know Annette and Benny's youngest boy's birthday," she said.

"October 12, Columbus Day," Kathy supplied. "He must be seven or eight, so '83 or '84."

"Ten," Gemma said. "He's the same age as my Lori."

"Is this all right that we're doing your homework, Dom?" Mario asked, chuckling because it was evident they were having a good time. Gemma was writing as fast as she could. "What kind of class makes you do a family tree over Christmas break?"

"American Peerage," he said.

"What kind of class is that?"

"Well, we don't exactly have classes," Dom said.

Mario shook his head. "We pay ten thousand dollars a year for these kids to go to school, and they don't even go to class."

"Lina is taking Outdoor Survival next semester. They build igloos or something like that," Kathy said. "She wants to be an accountant, so what I ask you is, why does an accountant need to know how to build an igloo?"

Dom was standing back from the group now, hands in his pockets, grinning. He'd put his shoes back on. I wanted to ask him where he fit in the family tree, if his last name was Ranalli or Peroni, but just then Bridgette came bursting into the living room, holding her hand out in front of her as if it was burned. Her eyes were full of tears. Bridgette's mother leaped to her feet at the sight of her daughter's obviously emotional state and reached out for her.

Alarmed, I looked around for Tony and saw him standing by the door, looking bewildered and concerned. "What's wrong?" I said.

Tony shrugged. "I asked Bridgette to marry me."

You could have knocked me over with a feather. What about school? was my first thought, but I didn't say it out loud.

"Well, what did she say?" Mario demanded to know. At that moment, he not only looked like a general but he sounded like one.

"She didn't answer me," Tony said, a bit of a tremor in his voice.

Bridgette whirled around. "Yes, yes!" she shouted from across the

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room. She was still standing half in her mother's arms, beet red, eyes still brimming with tears, showing the ring on her finger to everyone within ten feet, which was a lot of people.

Tony rocked back on his heels and grinned.

"Here, here! A toast is in order," Mario shouted as he raised his half-full glass of punch. "May you be as happy as your parents, and have children who behave no better than you!"

Glasses clinked and laughter rippled, and someone laughed like tinkling bells.

"Aunt Jen, look at Paul," Dom whispered.

Paul had a glass raised to his lips, but his eyes were fixed, not on Tony or Bridgette, but a pretty dark-haired girl who was laughing with Bridgette, laughing like tinkling bells.

"The laugh," Dom said. "It's her."

"Who is she?" I asked.

Dom was fidgeting with what looked like a portable CD player. The girl laughed again, I think because Bridgette was so embarrassed by all the attention.

"Angie Harris," he said. "She came with Brian. Excuse me. I want to make sure I got her laugh on the CD."

"That's a recorder?" I asked.

"New technology," he said over his shoulder.

A CD recorder. Oh, dear. Paul would want one and they were sure to be expensive. I could hope they cloned the technology before next Christmas. Fat chance.

Paul had gone over to Angie Harris, and I heard him say something about the toast Mario had made. To judge by Angie's quick laughter, it must have been a witty remark. I guess that encouraged him to keep going; Angie was still laughing prettily long after Bridgette had moved on to show others her engagement ring.

Christmas Eve parties at our house end by ten o'clock. It's not a time limit Sal or I have ever imposed; it occurs naturally. Santa Claus arrives early in the morning at households with children, even when the children are seventeen and twenty. The Eastmans were the first to leave. We didn't have to find little Nicole's coat; she was still wearing it, but now her eyes were just sleepy, no longer amazed.

"Happy anniversary, Aunt Jen," Dom said from the crush of young people heading for the door.

"Hey, Dom. Where's my mom's CD?" Paul asked, as he shook Dom's hand in farewell.

"I put it back in the case," he replied, "so I'll know right where to find it."

Paul patted Dom's shoulder, a "good man" gesture, then turned to say

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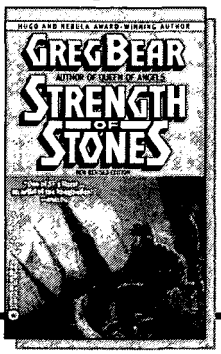

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A WORD FROM BRIAN THOMSEN

Science fiction is about looking forward. Many times these future peeks result in an often clichéd sense of wonder, and for me they form benchmarks along the collective images of my mind. Some of these benchmarks include *Rocket Ship Galileo* (the first Heinlein I ever read), *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the actual coverage of the Apollo moon landing...and all of the works of Greg Bear.

No matter how many possible futures lie ahead – end of the world, super evolution, or therapied utopia – just waiting for me to take a peek, I can't help feeling that Greg has seen them first.

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goodbye to Angie and Brian. Tony was helping Bridgette put on her coat, the two of them looking extremely pleased with themselves.

By ten-thirty, everyone was gone, and Sal was picking up paper plates. I went over to the table where the family tree was lying face up among the crumbs on the red tablecloth. It was pretty well filled in, Gemma's neat handwriting and Kathy's and even Mario's scrawl. He didn't write like a general.

"Did you get Dominick on there?" Sal asked me as he popped more paper plates into the trashbag.

"That's what I was looking for, and the answer is no. But not all the Ranallis and Peronis are filled in. Got all the DeRoses though." I looked at Sal. "Was he a Ranalli or a Peroni?" I never have time to get the important stuff on Christmas Eve. I shook my head.

"Ask Annette and Benny tomorrow, if they get here tomorrow."

"He's neither," Paul said.

"How do you know that?"

"I asked him, and he said, 'neither,' " Paul answered. "Did you see that CD recorder he had?"

"What did you say when he said 'neither'?" Sal asked. He held the trashbag open so that Paul could dump a paper cup in it.

Paul swigged down what was in the cup; one can only hope it was his. "Neither what?" he asked, spiking the trashbag with the cup.

"Neither a Ranalli or a Peroni."

"I said, 'Oh.' What was I supposed to say?" He frowned. "I thought they had to make CD recordings in a special environment of some kind."

"They do," Tony said. "In a clean room. The workers wear white space suits and masks over their faces. It couldn't have been a CD recorder. I'd have heard about it. Someone at school would have had one."

"He said it was a recorder."

"If he wasn't a Ranalli or a Peroni, who was he?" I asked.

No one answered.

And just how had he known that we keep our trash in the garage, I wondered.

"Do you suppose he was a stranger off the streets?" Sal asked.

"You mean like a bag person?" Tony asked.

No one thought that.

"If he wasn't a Ranalli or a Peroni, he had to be a DeRose," Paul said firmly.

"He looked like a DeRose," I said.

"Grandpa's name was Dominick, wasn't it?" Paul asked.

"Yes, but . . ." Sal hesitated. "A Christmas ghost? You think my father came from the beyond to spend Christmas Eve with us?"

Paul shook his head. "Not with a CD recorder."

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"What was he recording?"

"Everything. Nothing special," Tony said.

"Oh, yeah. He recorded something special," Paul said. He sat down by the Christmas tree and pulled a package out, hefting it in his hands. "He recorded me telling Brian and Angie about how when I had kids, I wasn't going to have any curfew for them, no healthy foods, and that I was going to give them big allowances." We must have given Paul blank looks. "Well, it was funny at the time. Uncle Mario made that crack about Tony and Bridgette having kids who behaved just like us. Angie kept asking me questions, like, how many kids and what were their names. That's what made me think of this. The names I gave my kids."

"Think of what?" I asked.

"I said Dominick and Rosa, first names that came to mind. I thought Dominick was Grandpa's name, not even thinking of Dom standing right there with his recorder—"

"Dominick is nice, but—Rosa DeRose?" I said. It didn't have a nice alliteration at all.

"That's about what Angie said, only she could barely get it out because she was laughing so hard."

I thought about Dom's eagerness to record that laughter. And to meet Paul's girlfriend. He'd known it wasn't Jill.

"I'd give a lot to have Dad saying he didn't believe in curfews on tape. Wouldn't you?" He was looking at Tony.

"My brother thinks he's been visited by a time traveler," Tony said solemnly. "I'm going to have to commit my own brother to an insane asylum on Christmas day. Do you think Bridgette will still marry me if there is insanity in the family?"

Paul glared at him, then he tossed the package to me. "Open this. I had to pay for it because Dom didn't have any money." He gave his brother a *take that* look. "Time travelers can't bring money with them. It doesn't have the right date."

Tony laughed.

I thought about the *scalliels*, that Dom had known the missing ingredient. And I'd said Paul liked them, and he'd said his father liked them. Paul?

"Open it," Paul insisted.

It was wrapped in tissue paper, wads of it, with a single strand of white string holding it together. I removed the string and pulled back the tissue. It was a gold star, just like the silver star Paul and Dom had gone back to the St. Nick store to get. I looked at Paul.

"Read the note," he said. "I already know what it says. I thought it was kinda hokey, but I figured you'd like it. You're into saccharine."

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I found the note. "It says, 'I'll see you at your Golden Anniversary. That's a promise. Love, Dom.' "

"That doesn't mean anything," Tony said. "The guy's twenty-five years old. He'd only be fifty."

"Or that he's been to our golden wedding anniversary already," I said. And if he had, it was a message to me that Sal and I had at least another twenty-five years together.

Sal must have thought that too, for he smiled at me, a pleased and thoughtful smile. But then he shook his head. "No time travelers. One of those punk Peronis!"

I spent a lot of time with my grandma.

"My mother and my brother go nuts on Christmas," Tony said. "Come on, you don't really think . . ."

But if I couldn't remember to put the Crisco into the eggs, how could he have seen his grandmother do it? I hated conundrums, and I shook my head.

"We'll ask Annette and Benny who he is," Sal said finally. "He's going to turn out to be a second cousin twice removed."

"Maybe," I said. To Paul I said, "He's taller than you by three inches."

"You marked him on the closet wall? I'm not done growing, am I?" Paul demanded to know.

"I've been the same height since I was seventeen," Tony said.

"Great. He's recorded me saying kids shouldn't have curfews and he's going to be bigger than me, too." Suddenly he jumped up, that catlike unwind to upright that only young bodies can safely perform. "The recorder," he said. "Maybe that's why he needed the CD. Even if he couldn't take it with him, it wouldn't matter because Mom keeps *everything*."

He'd have dashed for the door, but Sal grabbed him by the collar and said, "Look, this is all very interesting, but do I have to clean this whole house by myself?"

Tony and Paul started to pick up and straighten, but I sat there with the golden star in my hands, wondering what a little boy named Dom would think of when he looked at the top mark in Sal's closet dated December 24, 1991.

I looked around to find Paul. He was gone. "Sal," I said. "What would you think of planting a piñon pine by the back door?"

He looked at me blankly for a second. "You want a piñon pine, we'll plant one. But not tonight. Who were you talking about yards with to make you think of that?"

"I never really got to talk with anyone, but I think tonight I met someone special. At least, every time I turned around, Dom seemed to be there."

Sal just grunted and went to get another trashbag.

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', Then I realized the stereo had come on, the Carly Simon album, which isn't Paul's taste in music at all. It was just Carly Simon, and I sighed after a while because it was still just Carly Simon. I wrapped up the golden star and put it in the china closet where it wouldn't get lost over the years. Then I picked up a paper cup half-filled with raspberry punch, humming along with the album.

I spent a lot of time with my grandmother.

It was just Carly Simon, but sometimes I thought I could hear the sound of laughter, like the tinkling of bells.●

Scalliels, Theresa Felice's Italian Dunkers

1 dozen	large eggs, room temperature (11 room temperature, 1 cold)
1/2 cup	Crisco
6 to 7 cups	flour, sifted (measure after sift)
1 teaspoon	salt
4 teaspoons	anise extract

Mix ingredients well to make a soft dough.

Form the dough by rolling it between your hands until it is 1/4" thick, then cut into strips with knife, and shape 5-inch long strips for frying (knots, bows, etc.).

Fry until golden brown (medium-high) in Crisco.

Frost with ordinary powdered-sugar-water frosting.

Makes over 100 cookies.

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CENTIGRADE 233

by Gregory Benford

In addition to this distinguished author's myriad accomplishments in the science fiction field, he has also been the host and script writer for the television series "A Galactic Odyssey." The show is an eight-part series that describes modern physics and astronomy from the perspective of the evolution of the galaxy. It will appear in the USA in 1992. Dr. Benford's articles on science have appeared in *The Smithsonian, Natural History, New Scientist,* and *Omni.*

It was raining, of course. Incessantly, gray and gentle, smoothing the rectangular certainties of the city into moist matters of opinion. It seemed to Alex that every time he had to leave his snug midtown apartment, the heavens sent down their cold, emulsifying caresses.

He hurried across the broad avenue, though there was scant traffic to intersect his trajectory. Cars were as rare as credible governments these days, for similar reasons. Oil wells were sucking dry, and the industrial conglomerates were sucking up to the latest technofix.

That was as much as Alex knew of matters worldly and scientific. He took the weather as a personal affront, especially when abetted by the 3D 'casters who said things like "As we all know, in the Greater Metropolitan Area latitudinal overpressures have precipitated (ha ha) a cyclonic bunching of moist offshore cumulus—" and on and on into the byzantine reaches of garish, graphically assisted meteorology.

What they *meant*, Alex told himself as cold drops trickled under his collar, was the usual damp-sock dismality: weather permanently out of whack thanks to emissions from the fabled taxis that were never there when you needed them. Imagine what these streets were like only thirty years ago! Less than that. Imagine these wide avenues inundated to the point of gridlock, that lovely antique word. Cars *parked* along every curb, right out in the open, without guards to prevent joyriding.

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" 'Brella?" a beggar mumbled, menacing Alex with a small black club.

"Get away!" Alex overreacted, patting the nonexistent shoulder holster beneath his trenchcoat. The beggar shrugged and limped away. Small triumph, but Alex felt a surge of pride.

He found the decaying stucco apartment building on a back street, cowering beside a blocky factory. The mail slot to 2F was stuffed with junk mail. Alex went up creaky stairs, nose wrinkling at the damp reek of old rugs and incontinent pets.

He looked automatically for signs that the plywood frame door to 2F had been jimmied. The grain was as clear as the skin of a virgin spinster. Well, maybe his luck was improving. He fished the bulky key from his pocket. The lock stuck, rasped, and then turned with a reluctant thump; no electro-security here.

He held his breath as the door swung open. Did he see looming forms in the murk beyond? This was the last and oldest of Uncle Herb's apartments. Their addresses were all noted in that precise, narrow handwriting of the estate's List of Assets. The List had not mentioned that Uncle Herb had not visited his precious vaults for some years.

The others had all been stripped, plundered, wasted, old beer cans and debris attesting to a history of casual abuse by neighborhood gangs. At the Montague Street apartment, Alex had lingered too long mourning the lost trove described in the List. Three hard-eyed Hispanics had kicked in the door as he was inspecting the few battered boxes remaining of his uncle's bequest. They had treated him as an invader, cuffed him about and extorted "rent," maintaining with evil grins that *they* were the rightful owners, and had been storing the boxes for a fee. "The People owns this 'parmen' so you pays the People," the shortest of the three had said.

There had been scanty wealth in any of the three, and now—

The door creaked. His fingers fumbled and found the wall switch. Vague forms leaped into solid, unending ranks—books!

Great gray steel shelves crammed the room, anchored at floor and ceiling against the Earth's shrugs. He wondered how the sagging frame of this apartment building could support such woody weight. Alex squeezed between the rows and discovered wanly lit rooms beyond, jammed alike. A four-bedroom apartment stripped of furniture, blinds drawn, the kitchen recognizable only by the stumps of disconnected gas fittings.

But no—in the back room cowered a stuffed chair and storklike reading lamp. Here was Uncle Herb's sanctuary, where his will said he had "idled away many a pleasant afternoon in the company of eras lost." Uncle Herb had always tarted up his writing with antique archness, like the frilly ivory-white shade on the lamp.

The books were squeezed on their shelves so tightly that pulling one

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forth made Alex's forearm muscles ache. He opened the seal of the fogged polymer jacket and nitrogen hissed out. A signed and dated *Martian Chronicles!* Alex fondled the yellowed pages carefully. The odor of aging pulp, so poignant and undefinable, filled him. A first edition, too. Pity about the signature; unsigned were more scarce, he remembered.

Still, probably worth a good deal. He slipped the book back into its case, already regretting his indulgence at setting it free of its inert gas protection. He hummed to himself as he inched down the rows of shelves, titles flowing past his eyes at a range of inches. *The Forever War* with its crisp colors. A meter-long stretch of E.E. "Doc" Smith novels, all very fine in jackets. *Last and First Men* in the 1930 first edition. Alex had heard it described as the first ontological epic prose poem, the phrase sticking in his mind. He had not read it, of course.

And the pulps! Ranks of them, gaudy spines shouting at customers now gone to dust. Alex sighed. Everything in the twencen had apparently been astounding, thrilling, startling, astonishing, even spicy. Heroines in distress, their skirts invariably hiked up high enough to reveal a fetching black garter belt and the rich expanse of sheer hose. Aliens of grotesque malignancy. Gleaming silver rockets, their prows no less pointed than their metaphor.

The pulps took the largest bedroom. In the hallway began the slicks. Alex could not resist cracking open a *Collier's* with Bonestell full-colors depicting (the text told him breathlessly) Wernher von Braun's visionary space program. Glossy pages grinned at their first reader in a century. To the moon!

Well, Alex had been there, and it wasn't worth the steep prices. He had sprained an arm tumbling into a wall while swooping around in the big wind caverns. The light gravity had been great, the perfect answer for one afflicted with a perpetual diet, but upon return to Earth he had felt like a bowling ball for a month.

Books scraped him fore and aft as he slid along the rows. His accountant's grasp of number told him there were tens of thousands here, the biggest residue of Uncle Herb's collection.

"Lord knows what was in the others," he muttered as he extracted himself from the looming aisles. The will had been right about this apartment—it was all science fiction. Not a scrap of fantasy or horror polluted the collection. Uncle Herb had been a bug about distinctions that to Alex made no difference at all. No novels combining rockets and sword-wielding barbarians, no voluptuous vampires, to judge from the covers.

Alex paused at the doorway and looked back, sighing. Bright remnants of a lost past. He recalled what awe that Brit archaeologist had reported

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feeling, upon cracking into Tut's tomb. Only this time the explorer *owned* the contents.

He made his way into the chilly drizzle, clucking contentedly to himself. He shared with Uncle Herb the defective gene of bibliophilia, but a less rampant case. He loved the crisp feel of books, the supple shine of aged leather, the *snick snick snick* of flipped pages. But to *read*? No one did that anymore. And surely the value of a collectible did not depend on its mere use, not in this Tits 'n Glitz age.

In less than an hour Alex reclined on a glossy Korean lounger, safely home, speaking to Louise Keppler on his wall screen. Her face showed signs of a refurb job still smoothing out, but Alex did not allow even a raised eyebrow to acknowledge the fact; one never knew how people took such things. Louise was a crafty, careful dealer, but in his experience such people had hidden irrationalities, best avoided.

"I'd need to see the whole collection," Louise said, peering off camera.

"Certainly. You might be advised to bring your bodyguard, however." He disliked business associates who always seemed to be doing something else when you called, their eyes tracking unseen distractions.

"For that neighborhood I should go in a tank." Louise smiled, eyes at last pinning him with their assessing blue. He thumbed a closeup and found that they were true color, without even a film to conceal bloodshot veins, the residue of the city's delights.

"You got the index?" He wanted to close this deal quickly. Debts awaited, and Uncle Herb had been a long time dying.

"Sure. I ran it through my assessing program just now."

Alex nodded eagerly. So that had been the distraction; she was swift. He shivered and wished he had paid his heating bill this month. His digital thermometer read Centigrade 08. A glance at the window showed the corners filmed by ice. "I hope we can agree on a fair market—"

"Alex, we've dealt before. You know me for no fool."

He blinked. "What's wrong?"

"Books, Alex? Early videos, yes. First generation CDs, sure—nobody realized they had only a seven-year lifetime, unless preserved. *Those* are rare." Her mouth twisted wryly.

"These are even earlier, much—"

"Sure, but who cares? Linear reading, Alex?"

"You should try it," he said swiftly.

"Have you?" she asked sardonically.

"Well . . . a little . . ."

"Kids still do, sure. But not long enough to get attached to the physical form."

"But this was, well, the literature of the future."

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"Their future, our past—what of it?" Her high cheekbones lent her lofty authority. She tugged her furs about her.

His knowledge of science fiction came mostly from the myriad movids available. Now that the genre was dead, there was interest in resurrecting the early, naïve, strangely grand works—but only in palatable form, of course—to repay the expense of translation into movids.

"They do have a primitive charm," he said uncertainly.

"So torpid! So unaware of what can be done with dramatic line." She shook her head.

Alex said testily, "Look, I didn't call for an exchange of critical views."

"Quite so. I believe you wanted a bid."

"Yes, but immediately payable. There are, ah, estate expenses."

"I can go as high as twelve hundred Yen."

"Twelve—" For the first time in his life Alex did not have to act out dismay at an opening price. He choked, sputtered, gasped.

Louise added, "*If* you provide hauling out of that neighborhood and to a designated warehouse."

"Haul—" He coughed a last time to clear his head. Twelve hundred was only two months' rent, or three months of heating oil, with the new tax.

"My offer is good for one day."

"Louise! You're being ridiculous."

She shook her head. "You haven't been keeping up. Items like this, they were big maybe a decade back. No more."

"My uncle spent a *fortune* on those magazines alone. A complete set of *Amazing*s. I can remember when he got the last of it, the rare slab-sheeted numbers."

She smiled with something resembling fondness. "Oh yes, a passing technical fancy, weren't they?"

"Expanded right in your hand. Great bioengineering."

"But boring, I'm told. Well past the great age of linear writing."

"That doesn't *matter*," Alex said, recovering slowly and trying to find a wedge in her composure. He drew his coverlet tightly around his numb legs. Should he jump up and shout, to gain some psychological edge, and also bring blood back into his frozen feet? No, too obvious. He summoned up a stentorian bark instead. "You're trying to cheat me!"

She shook her head slowly, wisely, red curls tumbling. He had to admire her craft; she appeared completely at ease while she tried to rob him. "You don't understand post-literate times, Alex. We've dealt before in posters, antique cars, oldie-goldies, grav-mets. Those are real collectibles. Books aren't."

"There's a wealth of *history* in that apartment. A complete set of everybody, the masters of the high period. Anderson to Zelazny. Pournelle and Aldiss, Heinlein and Lem, everybody."

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"And worth damn little. Look, I know the situation you're in. Let me—"

"I don't want charity, Louise." He did, actually, but the best guise was to pretend differently.

"Those other apartments of Herb's, they had really valuable goods." Her eyes drifted off camera, lost in memories. "Unfortunate that he did not secure them better."

"Those were good neighborhoods when he started buying up apartments for storage. With rent control that was a smarter way to use them, after all." If he kept her talking he might think of a way to jack up her price.

"Still is," she said reflectively. "I knew Herb well, and he was a savvy collector. A fine man. I told him to junk the books long ago."

This kind of scuffing around the topic was standard for dealers, but Alex found it only irritating now. He remembered rumors that Uncle Herb had kept several mistresses in the business, and suddenly he suspected that Louise, with her distant gaze and pursed lips, was recalling some fevered trysts.

Her eyes clicked back from the infinite and became analytical. "Okay, fifteen hundred Yen. Top offer."

"Absurd!"

"Call me when you calm down, Alex."

And she was gone, trickling away on the wall screen.

He calmed down with a movid. His favorite reader had a buffed leather jacket and a large tubular spine. He inserted a cylinder of *The Lust of the Mohicans* and contentedly watched the opening segments of the period piece drama on his enveloping walls, sitting amid the revelry and swank. Entertainment was essential these forlorn days, when all who could had already fled to warmer climes. Even they had met with rising ocean levels, giving the staybehinds delicious, sardonic amusement.

Alex tired of the main plot thread, distracted by his troubles. He opened the booklike reader and began scanning the moving pictures inside. The reader had only one page. The cylinder in its spine projected a 3D animated drama, detailing background and substories of some of the main movid's characters. He popped up sidebar text on several historical details, reading for long moments while the action froze on the walls. When he turned the book's single sheet, it automatically cycled to the next page.

Alex had been following the intricate braided story-streams of *Mohicans* for months now. Immersion in a time and place blended the fascinations of fiction, spectacle, history, and philosophy. Facets of the tangled tale could be called up in many forms, whole subplots altered at will. Alex seldom intruded on the action, disliking the intensely interactive

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features. He preferred the supple flows of time, the feeling of inexorable convergence of events. The real world demanded more interaction than he liked; he certainly did not seek it in his recreation.

The old-fashioned segments were only a few paragraphs of linear text, nothing to saturate the eye. He even read a few, interested at one point in the menu which an Indian was sharing with a shapely white woman. Corn mush, singularly unappealing. The woman smacked her lips with relish though, as she slipped her bodice down before the brave's widening eyes. Alex watched the cooking fire play across her ample breasts, pertly perched like rich yellow-white pears in the flickering, smoky glow—and so the idea came to him.

"Alex," the Contessa said, "they're *mar*velous."

"My best," he said, already catching on that the way to handle these people was to act humble and mysterious. "Absolute rarities."

"Hard to be*lieve*, isn't it?" The Contessa gave her blonde tresses a saucy little flip. "That people *were* that way?"

Alex had no idea what way she meant, but he answered, "Oh, yes, nothing exceeds like excess," with what he hoped was light wit. Too often his humor seemed even to himself to become, once spoken, a kind of pig irony—but the Contessa missed even this much, turning away to greet more guests.

He regarded them with that mixture of awe and contempt which all those who feel their lights are permanently obscured under bushels know all too well—for here was the Mayor and his latest rub, a saffron-skinned woman of teenage smoothness and eyes eons old. They gyred into the ample uptown apartment as if following an unheard gavotte, pirouetting between tight knots of gushing supplicants. The Mayor, a moneyed rogue, was a constant worldwide talk show maven. His grinning image played upon the artificial cloud formations that loomed over his city at sunset, accompanied by the usual soft drink advertisements.

Impossibly, this glossy couple spun into Alex's orbit. "Oh, we've heard!" the Mayor's rub squeezed out with breathless ardor. "You are *so* inventive!"

The Mayor murmured something which instantly eluded Alex, who was still entranced by the airy, buoyant woman. Alex coughed, blinked, and said, "It's nothing, really."

"I can hardly *wait*," the perfectly sculpted woman said with utterly believable enthusiasm.

Alex opened his mouth to reply, ransacking his mind for some witticism. And then she was gone, whisked away on the Mayor's arm as if she had been an illusion conjured up by a street magician. Alex sighed,

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watching the nape of her swanlike neck disappear into the next knot of admiring drones.

"Well, *I'll* talk to you longer than that," Louise said at his elbow.

She was radiant. Her burnt-rust hair softly flexed, caressing her shoulders, cooing and whispering as the luxuriant strands slid and seethed—the newest in biotech cosmetics.

Alex hid his surprise. "It was much longer than I expected," he said cautiously.

"Oh no, you've become the *rage*." She tossed her radiant hair.

"When I accepted the invitation to, well, come and do my little thing, I never expected to see such, such—"

"Such self-luminosities?" Louise smiled demurely in sympathy. "I knew—that's why I strong-armed the Contessa for an invitation."

"Ah," Alex said reservedly. He was struggling to retain the sense that his head had not in fact left his body and gone whirling about the room, aloft on the sheer gauzy *power* of this place. Through the nearest transparent wall he saw brutal cliffs of glass, perspectives dwindling down into the gray wintry streets of reality. Hail drummed at him only a foot away. Skyscraper, he thought, was the ugliest word in the language.

Yet part of a city's charm was its jagged contrasts: the homeless coughing outside restaurant windows where account executives licked their dessert spoons, hot chestnut vendors serving laughing couples in tuxes and gowns, winos slouched beside smoked-glass limos.

Even in this clogged, seemingly intimate party there were contrasts, though filmed by politeness. In a corner stood a woman who, by hipshot stance and slinky dress, told everyone that she was struggling to make it on the upper west side while living on the lower east. Didn't she know that dressing skimpily to show that you were oblivious to the chilly rooms was *last* year's showy gesture? Alex snuggled into his thick tweed jacket, rented for the occasion.

"—and I never would have thought of actually just making the obvious *show* of it you did," Louise concluded.

Incredibly, Louise gazed at him with admiration. Until this instant he had been ice-skating over the moments, Alex realized. Now her pursed-mouth respect struck him solidly, with heady effect, and he knew that her lofty professionalism was not all he had longed for. Around him buzzed the endless churn of people whose bread and butter were their cleverness, their nerves, their ineffable sense of fleeting style. He cared nothing for them. Louise—her satiny movements, her acerbic good sense—that, he wanted. And not least, her compact, silky curves, so deftly implying voluptuous secrets.

The Contessa materialized like one of the new fog-entertainments, her whispery voice in his ear. "Don't you think it's . . . time?"

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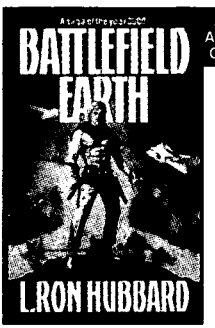

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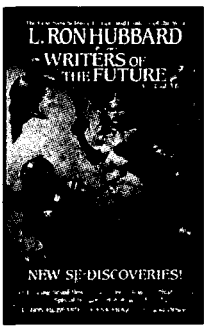

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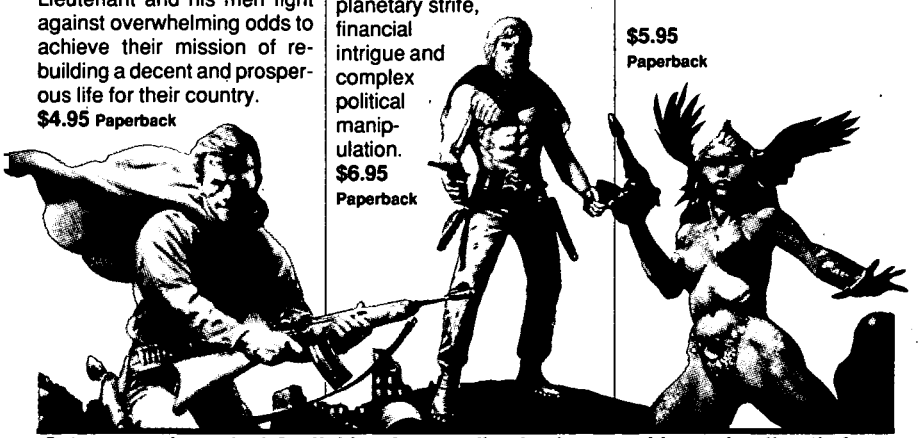

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"Oh. Oh yes."

The crowd flowed, parting for them like the Red Sea. The Contessa made the usual announcements, set rules for the silent auction, then gave a florid introduction. Sweating slightly despite the room's fashionable level of chill, Alex opened his briefcase and brought out the first.

"I give you *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, June 1940, featuring 'The Voyage to Nowhere.' Well, I suppose by now we've arrived."

Their laughter was edgy with anticipation. Their pencils scribbled on auction cards.

"Next, *Startling Stories*, with its promise, 'A Novel of the Future Complete in This Issue.' And if you weren't startled, come back next issue."

As more lurid titles piled up he warmed to his topic. "And now, novels. *Odd John*, about a supergenius, showing that even in those days it was odd to be intelligent. Both British and American first editions here, all quite authentic."

Louise watched him approvingly. He ran through his little jokes about the next dozen novels. Utopian schemes, techno-dreams.

Butlers circulated, collecting bids on the demure pastel cards. The Contessa gave him a pleased smile, making an O with her thumb and forefinger to signal success. Good. The trick lay in extracting bids without slowing the entertainment.

"I'm so happy to see such grand generosity," Alex said, moving smoothly on. "Remember, your contributions will establish the first fully paperless library for the regrettable poor. And now—"

They rustled with anticipation.

A touch more of tantalizing to sharpen matters, Alex judged: more gaudy magazines. A fine copy of *Air Wonder Stories*, April 1930, showing a flying saucer like a buzz saw cutting through an airplane. Finally, an *Amazing Stories* depicting New York's massive skyline toppling beneath an onslaught of glaciers.

"We won't have that, will we?" Alex asked.

"Nooooo!" the crowd answered, grinning.

"Then let the past protect us!" he cried, and with a pocket lighter bent down to the stack he had made in the apartment's fireplace. The magazines went off first—*whoosh!*—erupting into billowing orange-yellow flame.

Burning firewood had of course been outlawed a decade ago. Even disposing of old furniture was a crime. They'd tax the carbon dioxide you exhaled if they could. But no one had thought of this naughtiness. . . .

The crisp old pulps, century-dried, kindled the thick novels. Their hardcover dust wrappers blackened and then the boards crackled. Volumes popped open as the glue in their spines ignited. Lines of type stood starkly on the open pages as the fierce radiance illuminated them,

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engulfed them, banished them forever from a future they had not foretold.

The chilly room rustled as rosy heat struck their intent faces. Alex stepped away from the growing pyre. This moment always came. He had been doing this little stunt only a few weeks, but already its odd power had hummed up and down the taut stretched cables of the city's stresses. What first began as a minor amusement had quickened into fevered fashion. Instant fame, all doors opening to him—all for the price of a pile of worthless paper.

Their narrowed faces met the dancing flames with rapt eyes, gazes turned curiously inward. He had seen this transformation at dozens of parties, yet only now began to get a glimmer of what it meant to them. The immediate warmth quickened in them a sense of forbidden indulgence, a reminder of lush eras known to their forefathers. Yet it also banished that time, rejecting its easy optimism and unconscious swank.

Yes, there it emerged—the cold-eyed gaze that came over them, just after the first rush of blazing heat. The *Amazing* caught and burst open with sharp snaps and pops. On its lurid cover New York's glaciers curled into black smoke.

Revenge. That was what they felt.

Revenge on an era that had unthinkingly betrayed them. Retribution upon a time which these same people unconsciously sought to emulate, yet could not, and so despised. The Age of Indulgence Past.

"Let's slip away," Louise whispered.

Alex saw that the Mayor and his newest rub were entranced. None of these people needed him any longer. His treason was consummated, Uncle Herb betrayed yet again.

They edged aside, the fire's gathering roar covering their exit. Louise snuggled against him, a promise of rewards to come. Her frosty professionalism had melted as the room warmed, the radiance somehow acting even on her, a collector.

As Alex crossed the thick carpet toward the door, he saw that this was no freakish party trick. The crowd basked in the glow, their shoulders squaring, postures straightening. He had given these people permission to cast off the past's dead hand.

The sin of adding carbon dioxide to the burdened air only provided the spice of excitement. Unwittingly, Alex had given them release. Perhaps even hope.

With Louise he hurried into the cold, strangely welcoming night.●

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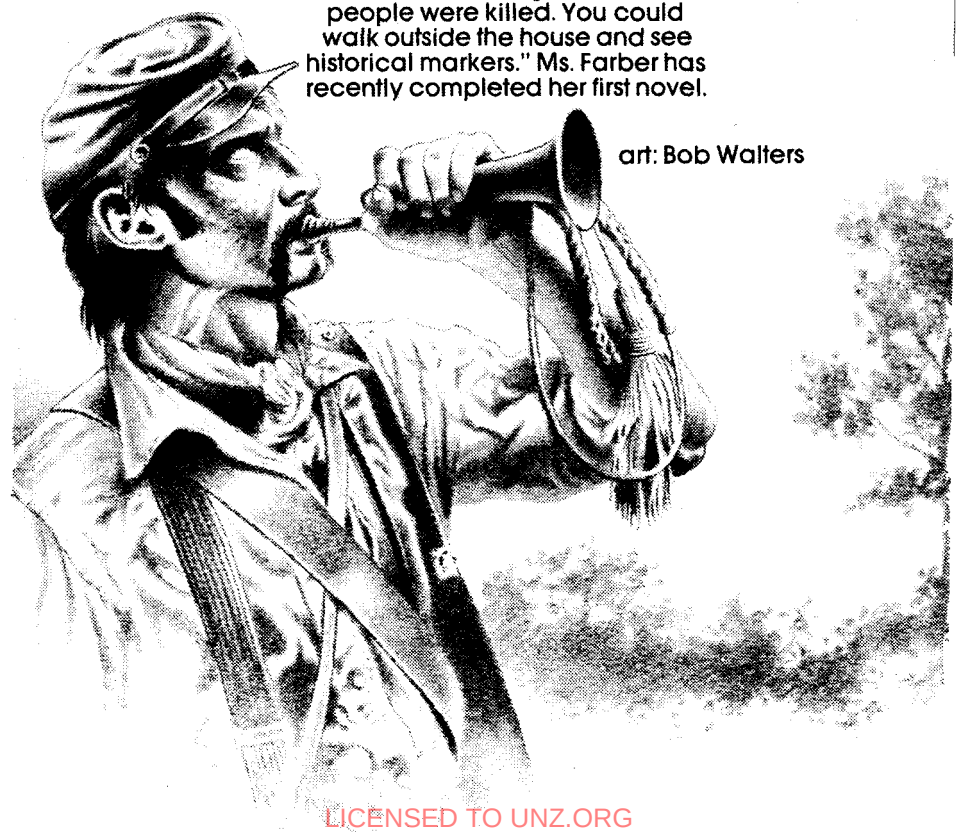
THE COYOTE RECREATION

by Sharon N. Farber

The author tells us her latest story was inspired by her move to the South, and by a visit to some friends who live on Missionary Ridge. "It was strange, realizing that my friends lived on the actual site of a major battle where a large number of people were killed. You could walk outside the house and see historical markers." Ms. Farber has recently completed her first novel.

art: Bob Walters



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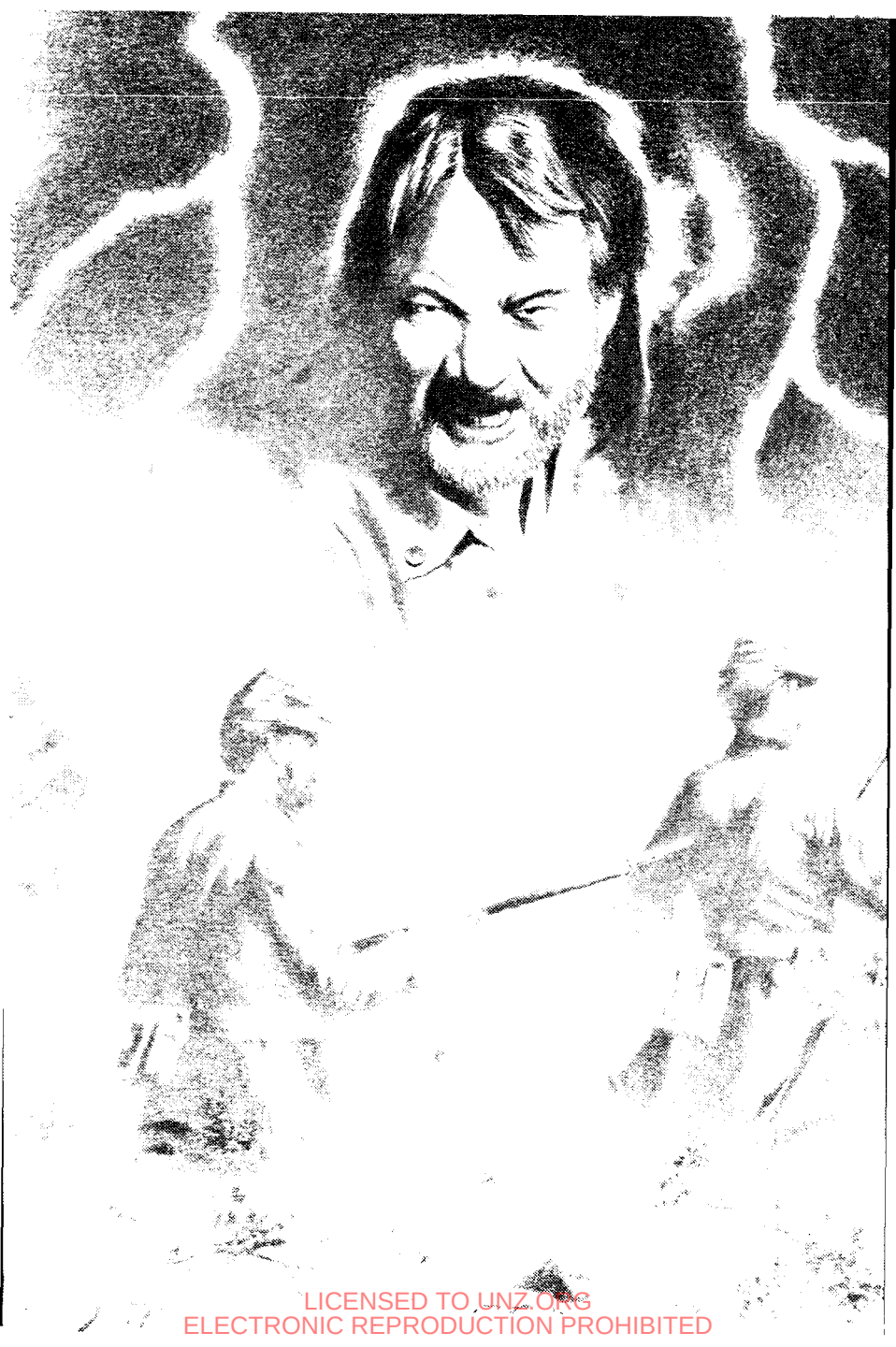

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Tony Savage could hear someone sweeping inside, so he banged on the front door of the saloon until Wilshire, the handyman, let him in.

"Show ain't 'til tomorrow," the old man muttered, pointing angrily to the sign announcing the *Special! This Week Only!* reopening of *The Shooting of Red-Eye Dave Savage*, in honor of the upcoming recreation of the Battle of Coyote. Tony had been with the show eight years now, since junior high, and Wilshire seemed determined to never recognize him.

"Gotta warm up," Tony said, brushing by him and heading for the upright piano. It had been dusted already, and looked pretty much the same as when he'd done the last show, back the weekend after Labor Day.

It sounded the same, too. He ran a scale, wincing, then tried a little Def Leppard, just for laughs.

Every summer it took a few days before he stopped being bothered by the tinny, off-key notes. The show's narration claimed that the piano was exactly as it had been on its arrival overland from St. Louis in 1867, but Tony had reason to believe that it had been tuned as recently as the Great Depression.

He did some "Maple Leaf Rag"—anachronistic, but it seemed to be what tourists expected to hear in a Western saloon—a few popular songs from before the 1850s, then launched into the ballad. He had honestly not so much as hummed the tune since September, but his fingers found the keys automatically. "Isn't the brain wonderful? All this unconscious knowledge stored in your cerebellum," his high school science teacher had told him once, before giving up on him. "You hardly *need* your higher cortical functions, Tony Savage. Who's to say what's rattling around inside your skull, just waiting to get out?"

He began to sing. "The Ballad of Red-Eye Dave" told of the slaying of Tony's great-great-great-grandfather by the Frisco Flush Kid, when the best friends caught each other cheating at cards.

"Now Red-Eye grabbed his six-gun,
And Frisco done the same,
And when the smoke had settled,
They'd busted up the game."

Grinning, Tony began to embellish the song with nasty little riffs and a mean bass line. He tried to imagine it being done by, say, Joan Jett and the Blackhearts. He could even see the whole boring frontier recreation, performed every two hours throughout tourist season, as a rock video. The band would dance around the saloon despite the gun battle, and then retire outside to watch the hanging. Only, instead of stopping the lynching, after Frisco promises to marry Red-Eye's widow—instead,

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the band hits a loud chord at the start of the musical break, spooking the horse.

"Yer voice's changed," Wilshire said.

Tony started. He hadn't even realized the handyman was watching him. "Yeah. About five years ago."

Wilshire sniffed, as if to say: *What are five years to me?* Indeed, Tony had been kept on long after he'd ceased to resemble Fred Savage, the actual twelve-year-old piano player who had watched his father gunned down. But management liked to have a genuine descendent of Red-Eye's firstborn in the show, it made good advertising.

"Well, I'm outta here," Tony said. "See you tomorrow. . . . You gonna be in the Recreation?"

Wilshire sniffed again. "Dress up. For kids."

Tony shrugged, letting himself out. The weather was uncommonly warm for the end of October. *Dress up* was right. Supposedly normal, responsible, grownup men from all over the country were converging on the county, in order to recreate the Battle of Coyote, fought the last day of October, one hundred and twenty-five years ago.

Maybe the buildings in this block of Old Town looked pretty much the way they had in the time of Tony's ancestors, but there were Ford Pintos at parking meters where there should have been barely-broke mustangs at hitching posts. The false-front buildings now housed restaurants and souvenir shops; though the denim-clad man stumbling out of a bar and pausing to glare at a passing Sioux was appropriate to either era.

At the corner, wood frame gave way to concrete and plastic. As Tony crossed between the centuries, an ancient Dodge pickup rattled by, a herd of buffalo airbrushed on its side.

"Tony! Hey!"

He waved, but the truck was already past, and he'd barely caught sight of Sam and Edgar Lastfeather in the cab. He hadn't seen them since the graduation dance, when their band had played for the last time. They'd all shaken hands as they broke down their equipment, and that had been that. He preferred to remember how they'd felt the first time they'd set up their instruments, fired up with the sheer power of their electric noise in the midst of the prairies, and with the peyote they'd begged off Mountain George. For a moment there, they'd thought Buffalo Ships would someday rule the world.

And now the brothers were on the reservation, Jerr was pumping gas, and Tony was lucky to have a job pretending to be his own great-great-great-grandfather.

Tony walked to the Burger King off Grand, and ordered a Whopper, fries, and a large Coke.

The woman at the register, recognizing him as a local, smiled apolo-

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getically. "Good luck finding a seat. We're packed. It's the war, you know." He grinned back.

The restaurant was full of outsiders, more than he'd ever seen before, even on a good day in summer. Some of them were already dressed in Civil War uniforms, looking pretty incongruous eating fast food.

Most visitors were staying in motels or RVs or renting rooms in private homes, but a few of the real die-hard war buffs had an encampment down the road, with authentic tents and even some wives dressed in crinoline and lace—far too classy for actual camp followers. Of course, in reality no women at all had accompanied the Confederates this far West. Last night's news had shown the women cooking up fried chicken and grits, what they'd claimed was old-fashioned camp cuisine, though the commentator later said that most soldiers back then had been lucky to get moldy biscuits.

Tony sat down at a table across from a man dressed in gray with sergeant's stripes, saber lying before him on the table as he ate a fish sandwich. *A fugitive from authenticity*, Tony decided. The saber neatly divided the table into two territories.

"Nice duds," said Tony.

"Gear costs $1500," the man replied.

"Jeeze." He could live for months on what this tourist spent on a costume he could wear maybe twice a year, not counting Halloween. It hardly seemed fair. But on the other hand, it would take fifty times that much to pay for his father's radiation and bail out the ranch. Fifty times was as good as impossible, so maybe it wasn't that bad, spending money on just having fun.

"It was worth it," the sergeant went on. Like most buffs, once started he just kept on going. "There were only four hundred soldiers in the Battle of Coyote, you know. We held contests, and only recreators with the most knowledge and best equipment won the right to be here." He smiled, a bit smug for a man eating in a Burger King. Tony felt a little substandard, too, as if the man were passing judgment on the town and thinking: *Lucky for them the events actually happened here, because we'd never* choose *them*.

"Yeah, but running around in wool outfits in Indian summer ain't my idea of fun," Tony remarked.

"This is serious history, son," continued the stranger. "Coyote is one of the big mysteries of the war. How did all those brave soldiers die, in what looks to have been an ambush by just seven men?"

The last thing Tony wanted was another damn lecture about the historical events he'd had rammed down his throat since grade school. "Oh, we all know the answer to that, round here."

"No one knows. The historical record . . ."

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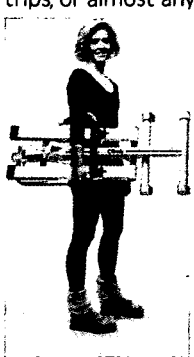

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"Screw the historical record," Tony replied. "Family knowledge, you know? We got the word from the only survivor, Sam Chisholm, right before my great-great-great-grandcousin Johnny Doppler shot him dead at the Hoedown Showdown. You wanna know the secret of the Battle of Coyote?"

Tony leaned in close, waited until the man leaned in too, and whispered.

"Haunts."

The soldier sat back, and returned angrily to his sandwich and fries. Grinning, Tony began tearing open the plastic condiment containers. Growing up in Coyote, he'd heard about the battle as far back as he could remember, and frankly he was sick of it. If all these folks wanted to come to town and pretend to be soldiers about to die—well, to Tony and to the rest of the town, it was just a chance to pick up a few extra bucks.

As he was smothering his Whopper with ketchup, someone knocked on the street window, then came in.

"Yo! Georgie!" the woman at the register called as he passed.

The newcomer waved at her vaguely, coming over to sit at Tony's table. The man had had another name once, when he'd been a professor at the nearby college, but since his hair and beard had gone white and he'd taken to living in one of those pickup trucks with a cabin built on the back, parked out the back forty of Tony's father's ranch without even an electrical hookup, everyone just thought of him as Mountain George. He even played that character now, every summer, in the saloon show. He was dressed in patched denim and a grungy buckskin jacket, his hair held back by a beaded headband. The Confederate sergeant wrinkled his nose, and began edging towards the far end of the seat.

"Hey, Tony."

"Hey, pal. Fry?"

The old man shook his head. "What're you doing tomorrow?"

"Playing Fred Savage."

"I mean, after that. In the battle."

"Aww, I'm not in that." Some townsfolk would be, mostly Derek Chisholm's crowd, trendy weekend ranchers portraying Confederate sympathizers. Chisholm was going whole hog in emulating his distant ancestor, even opening up the lot behind his bank for the troopers to camp on, the way Sam had put up the real soldiers on his ranch. It was funny, seeing horses grazing by the *Soon To Be A K-Mart* sign.

"You owe it to your forebears, boy."

"The Doppler Gang didn't come here 'til a good three years after the battle."

"What about Jessie Crooked Knife?"

"Well, yeah . . ."

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His great-to-the-third grandmother had been in the battle, though no one was quite sure what a barely teenaged squaw had been doing there, except perhaps reloading rifles for her father's bloodbrother Mountain George. Jessie had become famous later, touring with Buffalo Bill and meeting the crowned heads of Europe, but, like the only other witnesses to the Battle of Coyote, had kept silent, even to the day she'd sat down in a hotel lobby in Paris and sung her death song, after learning the fate of her daughter Iphigenia Savage at Wounded Knee.

"Look here." Mountain George pulled out a book from his rucksack. It was *Frontier Days In Coyote*, the book whose occasional royalties supplemented whatever income he derived from the summertime show, and selling arrowheads, and (Derek Chisholm let everyone know, his bank cashing the checks) Social Security Disability. The book jacket was torn and faded, but Tony could see bits of the author's photograph. It was hard to think that his friend had once had that calm expression, not to mention the short dark hair, tweed jacket with leather patches, and the neatly appointed library full of books.

Mountain George flipped the book open to the plates in the center, and held it out for the young man to examine.

"See?"

Tony glanced at it quickly, then looked away. "Billy Pike. So?"

He hated those ghastly mortician parlor photographs they used to do of slain gunmen, closeups showing slack jaw and glassy eyes half-open. Billy Pike must have led an interesting life, running away from a solid home in Virginia, turning fugitive after Harper's Ferry, going West and to an eventual end in a pointless drunken shootout in Abilene in 1883. They said his last words seemed to be about the battle. "I just made one mistake. I should of let him shoot Sam Chisholm."

"*Look*," George demanded, grabbing the nearby Confederate's sword with a quick " 'scuse me," and unsheathing it just enough so Tony could see himself in the highly polished blade. Tony chewed his last bit of burger, and reflected on his image. "Okay," he said finally. "I take your point."

His wispy hair was the color of dried grass in autumn, his face sharp and pale, only high cheekbones betraying his distant Indian ancestry. He could make a creditable Billy Pike.

"Will you do it?"

Tony thought a bit, chasing a piece of lettuce around his tray with a finger.

"You'll be on TV," George told him.

"No big deal." He'd been photographed often enough, playing the piano in the gunfight recreation. Sometimes it gave him the creeps, knowing that his picture was in uncounted family albums, next to little Tommy's

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first bike and late Aunt Martha's wedding anniversary. Sort of like little fractions of his soul, spread out over the entire country; France and Japan too.

But that was him playing Fred Savage, and this wouldn't really be him, either—just him standing in again for someone dead a hundred years. Like he didn't really have any life of his own.

"Come on," George urged him. "Your ancestors hunted buffalo on these prairies, boy, and raised cattle, and shot down the whole damn Chisholm clan in the '76 range war. You going to let Chisholm's candy-ass friends have all the glory? This is *your* town. Your blood is the soil. You going to let Chisholm take your pride, along with your daddy's ranch?"

"Fuck you," Tony said, standing up and pushing back his chair. "Fuck you and the horse you rode in on, Mountain George."

Some college students at a table near the door began to whistle.

"And fuck you too," Tony said. "It *is* my land, and I'm sick of it going to all you greedy yuppy puppies . . ."

Mountain George stood up and shouted, "Then fight for it!"

"All right, goddammit. I'll be there."

He stalked out of the Burger King, with the college students cheering him. They didn't have the sense to know who was on what side, or they just didn't care.

The night before everything was to start, Tony left after the last show at the saloon and went down to the old highway, still dressed in his Fred Savage costume. A truck stopped to give him a lift.

"I'm headed out the reservation."

The trucker stared at him. "That ain't no place to play cowboys and Injuns, kid. Y'want me to call yer folks and tell 'em where to pick up the body?"

"It's okay, I got friends there."

That made the trucker suspicious, and the rest of the ride went on in silence, except the tapedeck playing Waylon Jennings. *My heroes never been cowboys either*, Tony thought. But, thinking about how all the white settlers had gone to all that trouble to screw over the Indians, and massacre them, and cheat on treaties, just to get this land so a hundred years later other slicks could run them off it, made him feel like the trucker should be a little more open minded. *We screwed them over, and now we're getting screwed over, and that's the way it always is, I guess.*

Sam and Edgar were sitting outside their house, decorating a van. Their airbrush was nearby, but they were still doing the preliminary sketches. Some kids were playing something between tackle football and basketball, using the window of a brokedown Ford as the basket. When-

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ever the ball went in, they'd have to hoist a small kid up to reach in the smashed window and fetch the ball back.

"Hey Thunderthumbs," said Sam, passing Tony a beer, like it hadn't been two years since they'd done this last. They went to sit on the tailgate of their pickup. Tony could see the painting of the buffalo herd closer now. One of the animals was also a woman, like a double exposure photo, and in the foreground, a brave with bow and arrow was acting amazed.

"Guy's just found out his new wife is White Buffalo Woman," explained Edgar. "She says his people can keep on killing buffalo as long as they're grateful and do it right."

"Hell of a wedding night," said Tony.

They sat in silence for about a half hour, watching the game. One of the kids, with a funny little chin and a small head, kept tripping over his own feet, but he'd pick himself up and keep on playing. Finally, when he'd gone down for the half-dozenth time, Edgar picked him up and carried him inside.

Sam looked at him, and shrugged. "No smarts."

Tony nodded. He'd heard all about fetal alcohol syndrome on the news.

Sam popped another can. "Any gigs?"

"Pawned my guitar. You?"

Sam pointed at the unfinished painting on the side of the van. It showed Coyote—another double-exposure figure—with a star in his hand, delivering fire to humanity. God, horses, men, all tended to fade off into swirling patterns.

"Looks good."

One of Sam's cousins wandered over, staring at Tony. "Hey, wasicu."

Edgar came back out of the house. "Lay off, Crazydog. He's Crooked Knife blood. Let's go to Coyote."

Sam nodded. "Town's named after the Trickster. That makes it a good place to drink."

"Town's named after a fucking four-legged eater of shit and garbage," Crazydog answered. He was already pretty much wasted.

They got in the cab of the Dodge, their cousin jumping in the back of the truck at the last minute, as they were speeding up, laughing like someone who's just counted coup on a warchief in the middle of a shooting war.

His father didn't like him coming home drunk, so Tony spent the night on the Lastfeathers' couch, sharing it with a few puppies. Mrs. Lastfeather woke him in the morning, and dropped him off just outside Coyote. He stopped in a Dunkin Donuts, washed his face and combed his hair in the restroom, and then bought a large cup of coffee that he downed while walking in the rest of the way.

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Nothing looked the same. They'd spruced up Old Town with some hitching posts and wanted posters, banned cars from the street, and swept up all the broken bottles and styrofoam burger containers, until the block looked at least like the way they thought it should have looked in the 1860s. Tony had to laugh. At some point last night, or more like that morning, he and his friends had filled the pickup with horse manure and dumped it all over Grand Street, deciding they were making some kind of political statement. But their drunken gesture only seemed to add to the authenticity.

"There you are! You look like something the cat dragged in and spat out." Mountain George pulled him over to a trailer, parked behind the old saloon. He began filling him in on his role, all the while mussing up his hair, adjusting his costume (the clothes he wore as Fred Savage would do fine), then fitting him with props. "Billy Pike used to be called Kid Bandana in Zak City, know that? Said it was the scarf from his lady Guinevere. A classical education's a dangerous thing in a rangeman. Leave it, it's tied right. Here, have a slug."

Tony took a swig from the jug, and choked. "What is this, buffalo piss?"

"It's the hair of the same dog that bit your ancestors," Mountain George said. "Made it myself. This pistol's loaded with blanks, but don't get smart and shoot it. Blanks can blow a hole in a man's skull. Besides, there wasn't any shooting that first day. Now remember, if you want to yell something, try *Abolition now!* or *The Union forever!* Try not to swear—they're filming it for the network news—and don't break Blaze's leg or I'll stake you to an anthill."

Tony stepped back to admire himself in the mirror. In his rumpled homespuns and chaps, with his pale hair a mess and his face covered with a barely visible day's growth of beard, he looked every inch the desperado, a fitting friend to Mountain George, with his buckskins trimmed with feathers and his long wild hair.

"Damn, we do look realistic. Is it time?" asked Mountain George.

"Time?" Tony shot his cuff, and pretended to stare aghast at his digital watch ($9.95 from the Walmart in Zak City). "Holy shit, what's this thing on my wrist? Lord save us, it ain't a-tickin'!"

"Shut up, this is important," snarled his friend, handing him a cheap guitar and then pushing him out of the trailer.

"There you are," cried the pageant director, rushing them back onto Grand Street, and to their places. Tony shook hands with his fellow Union sympathizers—a couple guys from the Amoco station, including his old drummer Jerr, all costumed as farmers, and an engineering professor from Flatbottle Aggie Tech, playing Elmont Dandy, the freed slave from Alabama. George had recruited some of the extras from the show,

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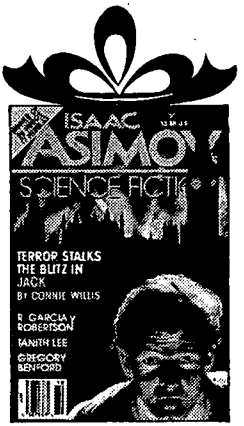

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too, and Tony was surprised to see Wilshire, now done up as a livery man.

"So look," Tony asked Jerr. "Any jobs? I can lube and do engine-work, but pumping gas'd be okay, too."

"I thought you were gonna go to college, like your brothers," Jerr replied.

Tony shrugged, scanning the crowd. He thought he saw his dad, standing with some friends from the Grange.

"Hey," said Del, the best tune-up man in the county. "I thought you guys were gonna be on MTV."

Tony scowled, turning away, regretting the prop guitar he had to carry. That's all a guitar would ever be for him, a toy. Oh, he could play any chord, and if he heard a riff a few times, he could do a fair imitation. But he couldn't create; he couldn't bring new patterns out of the void. The best he could do was string together bits of other people's music, and that wasn't enough for him. If he couldn't be a rock star, then he was damned if he'd play in a bar band, or teach pimply kids their F, G, and C. He'd last seen his Stratocaster hanging on the back wall of a Fourth Street pawn shop in Flatbottle. He didn't know but that it might be sold by now; he'd given up visiting it.

Newsmen surrounded them; up to then, they'd been interviewing Chisholm's group, who were expensively costumed and seated on horses that looked too well fed and clean to be authentic. "How does it feel to be recreating history?" asked a man. Tony recognized him as the weekend anchor on the local ABC affiliate.

Mountain George took the questions; when he started to speak, his voice seemed to gain resonance and authority. You could almost shut your eyes and think you were in a classroom, Tony thought. Only eventually you'd have to open them again, and you'd see the flies lighting on his greasy hat, and the gaps in his teeth, and the stringy long hair, and you'd remember that this was the man who (legend had it) put seventeen college freshmen in the hospital by feeding them peyote and then insisting they sit under the September sun until they met their spirit-teachers . . .

"It was a momentous day in the history of the Territory," Mountain George said. "Of course, to the south and west, the Indians were taking advantage of the war in the States to inflict a reign of terror on the settlers. Up here, though, things were still relatively peaceful.

"But the Confederacy was trying to unite the tribes, hoping a frontier war would divert the Union's resources, and they'd also heard rumors of the Mountains of Gold. Thus, three hundred Confederate soldiers marched north to the Little Crabapple River, where they were welcomed by the ranchers, led by Sam Chisholm and his brothers."

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"The same Sam Chisholm who was the sole survivor of the Battle of Coyote?"

Mountain George gave him that smile of praise that professors save for students they consider idiot savants.

The reporter, slightly unnerved, went on. "And what are we to see here today?"

"Even without divisions due to the war, there had already been a good deal of conflict in Coyote. In fact, that's why there were no real Indian troubles up here—the settlers got on so poorly together that they were too busy to doublecross the natives. It was farmers versus ranchers, the men who cultivated and fenced the fields versus the men who liked to run cattle through them; and cowboys versus townsfolk, who objected to their, shall we say, uncivilized ways. But only a few dared stand up to the Chisholms' faction . . ."

The reporter was beginning to shift from foot to foot. Mountain George changed his tone a bit. "But that's all background. Today, you'll see a recreation of the famous Brawl on Grand Street—at that time, in fact, the *only* street in Coyote, but named with typical frontier panache—ending up with Billy Pike's legendary lone ride to fetch the cavalry at Zak City." He clapped Tony on the shoulder, and Tony, his face a studied blank until then, smiled for the cameras. *Hi dad.*

They repaired to their places: Mountain George with his jug on the stoop outside the saloon, Tony leaning against the hitching post and strumming the guitar. The black engineer pretended to be enjoying the music, and the farmers clustered together gossiping, or discussing corn futures, or whatever. A few women and children, also in period clothes, strolled by.

"Check this out," Tony whispered, and did some Clapton, not easy on a ten dollar acoustic guitar. The others glared at him.

"Shit, I didn't know you were taking this so serious," he said. "Sorry."

The pageant director made little movements with his hands. It was time for things to get going.

Mountain George said loudly, "Play *The Days of Forty-nine,* Billy. I c'n remember the Oregon Trail out to the gold fields . . ."

On cue, the Chisholms thundered into town, reining their horses in and looping the reins on posts before the saloon.

"Move aside, mountain man," said Derek Chisholm. He had that lean feral appearance that comes of tennis and cutting deals, looking as formidable as his trigger-happy ancestor must have. "We're thirsty."

"All your foreign soldiers done drunk you outta house and home?" asked Elmont.

"What do you know about them, you cheap hoodlum?" Chisholm raised his gloved hand, as if to backhand him. Were he to be truly authentic,

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he would have used a more racist epithet. Sam Chisholm had not been worried about appearances.

Mountain George rose up, interposing himself between the rancher and the freedman.

"We all know you're keeping a passel of gray-bellied traitors, and you better get home soon 'fore they *all* sleep with yer wife."

Chisholm's friends restrained him, while the farmers moved closer. "Now settle down, lads," old Wilshire said. "I feel we can do without an altercation." They'd taken much of the dialogue from the original newspaper accounts; Tony wondered if frontier stablehands had really talked like that.

"Not so long's they want to bring their damn war here, and rile up the Injuns," said Elmont.

"What you mean?" asked a farmer, his fellows coming nearer.

"Don't listen to those pusilanimous drunkards," quoted Chisholm.

Mountain George, who lived with the Sioux and ought to have known, said "Johnny Reb's been encouragin' the massacrees."

A woman settler shrieked. "We're all gonna die, like New Ulm."

"Shet your mouth," replied Chisholm.

"Don't you tell my wife nothin'," shot back a farmer, then swung his fist at one of Chisholm's men. The first blows were traded.

"Yeehah!" shouted Tony, leaping into the fray and tackling a man in a fringed suede vest and Tony Lama boots. He jumped back, smirking at the way he'd made the rich man land on a pile of horse manure, only belatedly recognizing his victim as the owner of the chain of video stores, his face familiar from late night ads on TV. *If you can't find it at Ted's, you can't find it at all. Now seven different locations throughout the quad-counties.*

"You son of a bitch," snarled Ted, attempting to tip him, too.

Tony remembered that he'd almost got a job once with a smaller video rental shop, before it had been forced to close. "Up the Union!" he shouted.

"Up yours," answered the video store man, kicking him in the belly. Tony fell to his knees, clutching his gut. This reenactment wasn't turning out half as fun as it was supposed to. Ted started for Tony's throat, then fell over as Mountain George, his nose all bloody, broke the cheap guitar over his head.

"Ride for the cavalry, Billy Pike!" the old mountaineer shouted. "Ride as if the hounds of Satan pursue you!" Again, you had to doubt the accuracy of the newspaper accounts.

"No shit!" cried Tony, scrambling to his feet. Someone took a dive for him but he sidestepped, next leaping over Chisholm, who was trying to strangle poor Elmont, and ran for the horse. He could see Blaze, saddled up and waiting. But hell, the sorrel gelding was half a block away.

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So instead, he decided to bend the facts a little. *I'm sure Billy Pike would've done it this way, if he could've.* He grabbed the reins and bounded into the saddle of Chisholm's gray Arab, wheeled the horse, and galloped away. Thundering down the tourist-lined road, cameras hardly able to track him, wind in his hair and his nose stopping up with blood, he suddenly realized that he felt great. Even in touch with his ancestors, in a weird sort of way. Next to counting coup or rescuing the body of a slain friend, there had been no braver deed for a Sioux warrior than to steal his enemy's horse.

Tony grinned, barely able resist the urge to fire his gun in the air. It would probably just frighten the damn horse so he'd buck and throw him, and then what? History would be changed, the cavalry wouldn't come, maybe the South would win the war, and certainly generations of professional and amateur scholars would leave off their infinite speculations about what had really happened in the Battle of Coyote.

He cleared Old Town, now galloping down asphalt streets where people still seemed to be going about everyday business. He went down the center of the street, both lanes of cars veering to miss him. Shoppers and students and storekeepers watched him go by, some of them cheering. Then he hit the edge of town, open fields no longer cultivated, and passed ruined farm houses, and some cheap student housing still under construction, and the new plant where minimum-wagers turned beef hooves and horns into little plastic condiment containers. He wondered if people might look out the window of that factory, and see him pass, maybe even recognize him. His moment of glory. The smell of beef by-products was getting pretty strong, making the horse skittish.

The first leg to Zak City was over the foothills to Flatbottle. The interstate had converted that ninety-minute ride to a ten minute commute now, which was why the college students were moving to Coyote, where housing was cheaper.

But, heading up into the hills, the dried grass and gopher holes were the same as they must have been 125 years earlier. Billy Pike had been riding Mountain George's Bucephalus, half mustang and half Nez Percé spotted pony. A horse like that could run all day and half the night, never stepping in a hole or spooking at a rattler.

Chisholm's gray began to slow down and fight the bit as they crested the first hill. Tony came to himself, reining to a stop. He looked out over the river valley, picking out the major buildings in town, and his father's land, off west. It looked just as run down from up there.

"I think I was actually gonna ride for Zak," Tony told the horse. "Go figure. Wonder if horse theft's still a hanging offense." He had to lead the Arab back down the hill, picking out a stable path.

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A patrol car was waiting for him at the foot of the hill. Tony handed over the horse's reins.

The sheriff blocked his path. He'd gone through school with Tony's father, but Tony's father was a dying man, and didn't employ half the county either. The sheriff was happy enough to see the town getting the business from the recreation, but he was beginning to wonder if this game might get out of hand. Already, Ted of Ted's Videos was in the hospital with a concussion. "What the hell were you doing, Savage?" he demanded.

Tony grinned innocently. "Riding for Zak City to fetch the cavalry, sir. Like I was s'posed to. Only this damn horse ain't got no trail sense. Tell the owner that, will you? He just ain't authentic."

He walked to the curb, gave a quick little salute to the deputies, and stuck out his thumb to hitch a ride.

Tony spent the rest of the day at home, playing the twelve-string his oldest brother had left when he'd gone away to college. He was trying to make some music that would count, but nothing seemed to come out but second-rate Nashville.

Giving up, he started puttering around the ranch, fixing things up some, though he didn't know why. The next owner would probably just sink a new well, and toss up a prefab barn and electric fencing. Or turn the whole place into condominiums. But it seemed more sensible to creosote the fences than to go watch the battle.

He did follow it some, on television. The day following the Brawl was just skirmishes, a few ambushes of Confederate soldiers by settlers, and a few farm burnings by the cowboys.

Tony watched them recreate the torching of Johnny Swede's homestead, including planting arrows so it would look like the Sioux had done it, but of course the child hiding in the cornfield got the truth out eventually. The high school drama class was playing Swede's family, and it got loud and messy. Tony saw a friend's little sister dragged screaming into the bushes by a couple of rangemen, and decided to switch to MTV instead. His dad was already asleep in his chair, images from the set dancing red reflections on his face. For a moment Tony thought his father was changing, his face becoming like their daguerrotype of Red-Eye Dave, and the lights from the television more like those of a healthy pine fire.

They'd had to sell the daguerrotype, to some private collector of Western memorabilia in Arizona. It had paid for almost two months of chemotherapy.

According to history, by the third afternoon the cavalry scouts arrived, engaging a small band of rebels out by Watson's Creek, which had not

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even had its name yet when the battle occured. It was a noisy battle, but with only a handful of casualties. Audience turnout was large, a few thousand tourists watching the fighting, buying snacks, and waving souvenir flags. The rest of the soldiers, waiting for their big day, came to watch as well, and joked as their dead comrades limped by, their involvement over. Even on TV, Tony could tell that the Union and the Rebels were mostly keeping separate.

"It's just a game," he muttered.

As usual, there were three times as many Confederate recreators as northerners—but for once, that was the authentic ratio.

In reality, explained the helpful commentator, the Rebels had spent the night maneuvering into position, not sleeping or hitting the bars as these modern warriors were doing. Their Sioux contacts had told them where the cavalry was encamped, seven miles west, and it didn't take a genius to figure that they'd approach the next day along the gorge of the Big Little Crabapple. The Confederates planned to catch them in a pincer, stationing half their forces near the gorge, the other half waiting to come in from behind. The Sioux were to have helped as well, but overnight they'd broken camp and ridden into Flatbottle, where they'd reduced the townfolk to hysteria by setting up their teepee village in the town square. But when the massacre happened, the tribe had an entire town for an alibi, leaving future historians with still more to wonder about.

Tony was awakened the next morning before dawn, by the sound of Mountain George pounding on the front door.

"Tony Savage! Get your ass dressed and out here!"

He leaned out the window, rubbing his eyes. "G'way, I'm tryin' to sleep . . ."

"You've done this much," Mountain George shouted. "You have to see it through."

"Okay. Okay. Just don't wake Dad."

He came out to the car. It was a Volvo wagon, with Elmont at the wheel. He was picking at a bandaid on his face.

"Forgot about this. Not authentic," the engineer said, finally ripping it off and tossing the remnants out the window.

Tony sat in the back seat beside Sam and Edgar Lastfeather, done up as the half-breed Baker brothers. Sam offered him a can of Bud.

Tony shook his head. "Later." They were the first Indians he'd seen in the recreation—the reservation council had decided it was a stupid thing to get involved with—and locals had never particularly courted Sioux participation in much of anything, anyway. The cavalry's few Indian scouts were being played by visitors in makeup. Tony decided

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that Mountain George must have recruited the brothers, probably calling in some favors from their high school days.

They headed toward town, picking up Wilshire at the trailer park, and then pulled into the No Parking zone outside Fung's Drugstore, and honked. There was a sign advertising half-price battle souvenirs, and a bigger one, saying *Going Out of Business*. No one could compete with the drug prices at the big new chains.

The pharmacist's family came down from the apartment above. Their teenaged daughter was dressed as an Indian maiden, in a long buckskin dress with quill embroidery. With her long black hair and reddish makeup, she almost looked like the real Jessie Crooked Knife, except that she was wearing bright pink mirror shades, despite the dark.

"Hi, Grandma," Tony said, letting her have his seat. He climbed in the back, with Wilshire and Jerr and the rifles.

Mrs. Fung leaned in the window. She had second-generation traces of a Chinese accent.

"You men make sure Jennifer doesn't get hurt." She seemed to be looking mostly at Elmont, who was, after all, a college professor, and presumably responsible.

"Aww, Mo-om," the girl said.

The pageant directors were based in a trailer strung with lights, parked in a meadow near the battlefield, dispensing last minute instructions along with coffee and doughnuts. Mountain George gave an interview to a yawning reporter.

"Isn't it unusual for the Department of the Interior to allow a battle recreation on the actual site? This *is* a historic site."

"You're right; Gettysburg and Chickamauga were refought at locations near the real battlefields. But Coyote is a unique situation. This is more than just a commemoration. So many mysteries remain concerning the battle, that we have hopes this recreation may shed some light on the actual events."

"Such as how seven men could ambush a battalion?"

"For starters. But there have been at least twenty books about the battle— Let's not get into theories, okay?"

Another reporter interrupted. "Weren't you the man who excavated the mass graves in the late Sixties, when the remains were moved to the federal cemetary? What did you find?"

Mountain George fixed him with a deliberate gaze. "Maybe I'll write a book about it. You don't want me to give away my ending, do you?"

"Come on, that was over twenty . . ."

Mountain George was looking uncomfortable. Tony's father occasionally mentioned the dig, how he used to ride out and sometimes lend a hand, or just tell the professor old family tales. But then, towards the

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end, everything seemed to get strange, with the historian changing from a sober academic to the burnout case who lived in a pickup truck and dressed like a fur-trapper.

Knowing his friend hated talking about the dig, Tony cut in. "We gotta get to our places, right? See you later, when we've won."

Mountain George flashed him a grateful look.

They could hear gunfire from the opening, predawn skirmishes, as half the Confederates met the Union advance riders. Tony and the girl playing his great-great-great-grandmother got glazed doughnuts and sat on the hood of a Buick, watching soldiers go by. He found it was very easy to make her giggle, and was trying his best to keep that going.

"Look at that one. He's packing away more calories than Sherman left in Georgia."

Jennifer laughed appreciatively. "I thought rebels were supposed to be lean and hungry."

It was true; only a few of the Confederates looked like the old war sketches of cadaverous men with pointy faces and haunted eyes. Most of them were thickset, their beer bellies belying the fantasy of years of warfare.

The Union soldiers were little better, most of them looking well fed and vaguely nerdish. This might have worked if they were playing draftees, back east, but they were definitely wrong for the wartime western cavalry, composed as it had been of the elderly, the convalescent, raw recruits, and a few "galvanized Yankees"—Confederate prisoners allowed the relative freedom of frontier service.

Chisholm's group—about twenty men dressed as cowboys and ranchers—rode by, glaring at Tony. Ted, his head bandaged under his mildly anachronistic Stetson, looked as if he were going to jump off and go for him, but his friends distracted him.

"Time to go," called Elmont. Jeeps were already ferrying camera crews and tourists to good points up on the western, low bluffs. Mountain George had been definite about allowing no reporters with his group across the river.

"Film us from afar," he said. "That's what the ambush was, distant flashes of death. Let's keep it that way."

The eastern sky was pinking up nicely, but the river down below was still in total blackness, as George led them up a trail to the cliff edge.

"Why here?" asked Elmont.

Wilshire leaned on his breechloader. In the orange dawn sky, he could barely see the reflections from camera lenses and spectacles and belt buckles on the cliffs opposite. "Look down there. Best damn spot to am-

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bush them as they come in the gorge. You can pick them off like fish in a bathtub."

"Right," answered George. "But there's more. Look."

He pulled some brush aside, uncovering some rocks, and struck a match for more light. "See this? Scorch marks. There was a fire here once." He dropped the brush back on it, and nodded to the girl playing Jessie. She began to gather dried grass, to add to the pile.

"Anyone could of lit a fire, anytime," said Edgar. Sam nodded.

"And this." With Jerr's help, he turned over a flat bit of loose sandstone. "See?"

Carved into the soft rock were initials, *WBP*, and some Roman numerals: *MDCCCL*, and the start of an *X*. "William Benton Pike. He never had the time to finish the date."

He stood at the edge, gazing out over the river. "Lots of things didn't get finished."

Tony blew on his hands. "Well, I'll be happy when this is finished, and things get back to normal. You plannin' to make a fire?"

"Soon," he replied. "Soon."

"Look out!" cried the girl. Some people were approaching up the steep trail.

"Goddam it, get out of here," Mountain George cried. "We said no reporters up here."

They ignored him, the man with the camcorder aiming it all around. "This is the spot chosen to recreate the ambush. Two armies converged below, and history says a mere seven men and seven guns managed to kill everyone, except for the lone civilian who escaped. How did they do it?"

"Mountain George has two rifles," said Jennifer. "I'm his reloader."

"What about that story Sam Chisholm spread—hundreds of Sioux warriors firing arrows down onto the soldiers?"

"The tribes were all in Flatbottle town square during the battle," Sam put in. "Present company excepted."

Jennifer/Jessie blushed.

"Too smart to get involved in this bullshit war," added Edgar. "Didn't matter to us which side won. They'd both nail our asses." The reporter glared at the brothers.

Tony whispered, "There goes your big moment on TV."

"Go read the eyewitness accounts in the *Zak City Argus*," said Mountain George. "How can you blame Indians with bows? No arrows. The burial parties didn't mention finding any arrows."

"Oh."

The sounds of shooting were getting closer.

"Just what will you be doing when the soldiers arrive?"

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"We'll be firing these rifles, armed with blanks, as quick as we can reload and as quick as the black powder smoke clears so that we can see to aim. We're playing buffalo hunters and woodsmen, so the thought is that at least half our shots should count."

"And someone's keeping count?"

Tony snickered. He was certain the amateur historians down there were keeping count of everything, including how many portatoilets the army required and how many beef burritos were sold at Taco Bell the night before the battle.

"It's time," Mountain George said. "Places, gentlemen—and you vultures get out of here. No, you're here with me, Billy—Tony. Elmont, you have that rock yonder; horseman, the cleft; Baker brothers . . ."

"We know."

Wilshire had already started out over the rocks, but Jerr, the brothers, and Tony exchanged their old Buffalo Ships secret handshake—reaching out to shake and then pretending to pour a can of beer on the other's head. It had always been a crowd-pleaser at their high school gigs.

"Break a leg, man."

"Yeah, let's knock 'em dead!"

Once the others had left, Tony sat on the edge, looking over. The sun was rising quickly now, and the river becoming visible. He could hear horses somewhere distant. Jessie and George began to build the fire, she holding a flint, he striking at it with another.

"Here, use this," Tony said, handing over his Bic.

"No anachronisms, dammit," George snapped, tossing the Bic over the edge.

"Shit!" said Tony. They were so high up, he couldn't even see the splash. "What's the big deal?"

"Your watch! Are you wearing it? Give it to me."

"No, dammit. Look, I thought I'd get into the spirit, so I wore old Fred's watch." It was about the only heirloom they hadn't sold. Yet.

Mountain George exchanged glances with the girl. "Fred Savage later married Jessie Crooked Knife's daughter. A connection. All right, you can keep it."

They set at the flints again, sparks finally taking hold. The grass began to smoke. Jessie blew on it softly.

Tony leaned back, cradling his rifle. He had the bullets arranged beside him, the way Mountain George had suggested that morning at the briefing. He held a singleshot breechloader; Mountain George's two muzzleloading Kentucky rifles lay nearby. He let his thoughts wander.

It was all well and good to be here now, just a big joke really. But it would have been different back then, that morning so long ago. Billy Pike, barely a few years older than he was now, had been ready to kill

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and be killed. How do you get up in the morning, with so uncertain a day ahead of you?

"Hey," he said. "The fire. Why'd they have a fire, anyway? Everyone'd smell it, and know they were there."

"Doesn't matter; it's in all the descriptions," Mountain George said. "Rocky Dan, the scout who was sent off before the battle, said, 'As we got near the valley, we smelled a campfire.' "

"Hmmn." *History, go figure.* As far as he could understand it, there must have been some pretty serious doubledealing going on behind the scenes. The Rebs probably just thought the fire belonged to their Sioux, waiting to help, and the Union must have known that Billy Pike and his pals were somewhere nearby. The soldiers of both sides would be dead by day's end.

"Why'd the Indians leave back then, anyway?"

"Mountain George convinced them," said Jessie. She was down on her haunches, warming her hands over the tiny flame.

The old man took up the story. "The enemy of mine enemy is not necessarily my friend."

"You find this out, researching?"

"Mountain George told me."

He looked over at his friend. "What's with this third-person shit? Really, how'd you find out?"

Mountain George smiled at him. Maybe it was the light, but his eyes looked different. Clearer, harder.

"I told him."

Tony was trying to think of a reply, when he heard the battle approaching. "Here they come!"

It was the Confederates, half of them on foot, seeming to flee before the Union soldiers, but really leading them into a trap. Tony could see some townsfolk down there, too. Some guy on a flashy black quarter horse—probably a bank vice-president—made a big show of falling off his horse and dying.

They got to the valley, let go their horses, and took cover in the rocks. The Union did the same. Outside the gorge, wranglers from Derek Chisholm's ranch waited to round up the loose mounts. The two armies began taking pot shots at each other. No one died quiet.

And then the rest of the Confederates arrived, yelling as they came running over the rocks of the river bank, and occasionally stopping to aim, fire, and reload. Tony watched them all scurrying to safety behind boulders, almost feeling sorry for them. From his vantage, they were naked, defenceless. He had a thought: *The armies weren't evenly matched, but from up here, maybe seven sharpshooters could clean up the scrap.*

"Now!" yelled Mountain George, waving his hat, and from nearby

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Elmont and the others began to fire down into the valley. "Shoot, Billy Pike! Shoot them *all*!"

"But I thought . . ." No, Tony decided, aiming his rifle at a red bandana on some town yuppie. It made sense. He'd thought he was supposed to be on the Union side, but since everyone got killed, the bushwackers on the cliffs couldn't have been too particular who they shot at.

He took aim at someone dressed as a Yankee, and fired. Black smoke obscured his view. *Damn. Even if I had real bullets, I have to wait to see if I've hit.* He could hear his friends' rifles, spread out along the ridge, but no shots from beside him. "Hey, Two Rifles, I thought you'd be doing twice the work . . ."

Slipping another cartridge into his weapon, he turned.

"What the hell?"

The Indian girl was bent over the smoke, softly chanting and throwing powder from a medicine bag sewn with geometric patterns, into the fire, while Mountain George just watched her, his eyes gleaming. Their index fingers were dripping blood into the fire, and they'd drawn red images of Coyote on their faces.

Tony put down his rifle and came over. "What are you doing?"

"Magic."

"Great." He'd known Mountain George his entire life, was used to him, he tended to forget just how loony the guy actually was. After all, he was harmless, except when he did that weird fasting shit and had to get dragged to the hospital. Tony started to return to the edge, to watch the fighting.

"Wait!" Mountain George grabbed him, spinning him back, and taking his wrist in a strong grip.

"You're hurting me, man." It was a bit late for it, he realized, but he began to get a little frightened.

"We need the blood of Jessie Crooked Knife," he said. "You're her descendent."

Then his buckknife was in his hand, and he'd sliced a cut in Tony's forefinger.

"Yeow! Shit, man . . ."

"Hold it over the fire!"

"Okay, okay. Just get away from me with that knife. . . . Are you crazy?" *Great move, Tony. The perfect question to ask a recluse who lives in a pickup truck and collects Disability.* He let his blood drip onto the fire, wondering how far they were going to take this mystic bullshit, and how he was going to get away. The Sioux hadn't done human sacrifice, had they?

"It's working!" Jessie cried. She stood back, and began to chant loudly. Where the hell had she picked up fluent Lakota?

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You in the sky? Is someone there to hear me?
I have suffered and demand repayment.
My children have suffered and demand repayment.
You who cause things to happen.
Will you send me vengeance?
Will you send my children vengeance?
You in the land? Is someone there to hear me?

She went on, and he was damned if he knew how he could be understanding the powersong. She wasn't talking English.

And then the smoke began to grow, and curl up, and become warriors, gray smoke braves who rose from the fire and stepped off, silently gathering on the cliff. They stayed all gray, except for smokey war paint the color of ochre. They looked to be of a dozen tribes, or more: Plains Indians, Iroquois, Seminoles, Costanoans, Cherokee . . . But despite their different clothes and weapons—none with white man's rifles—they all bore war shields, and the war shields all had bloody images of Coyote.

"What the fuck . . ."

Tony reached out without thinking, putting his hand right through an Apache warrior. His hand numbed, like one stage before frostbite.

Mountain George began to laugh. "Billy!" he said.

"Hey, I'm Tony, man."

For a minute, Mountain George almost seemed himself, his eyes with that hollow, haunted look again, his hands with that little shake, and his voice higher and getting hysterical. "Do you know what I found, when we exhumed the mass grave, Tony? Or more like it, what I didn't find? Bullets. Almost none of the skeletons had bullets in them. Or saber slashes, either. You can tell a lot from skeletons."

Tony was still watching the smoke become warriors. They must have put something in his coffee. LSD, or some other damn Sixties drug. Or maybe it was that powder the girl had been throwing on the fire. "Okay," he tried, soothingly. "So tell me, what *did* kill them?"

"The ghost avengers," Mountain George cried. Jessie looked up at him briefly, her expression determined and a bit disdainful; not at all the expression of a thirteen-year-old girl. The old man became calm again, with that face that didn't seem his own. The face of the friend of the coyote; the face of a man dead one hundred years or more.

Tony backed against the rocks at the edge. They were blocking him from the path down. "So Sam Chisholm was right. There were Indians on the cliffs." The air smelled of black powder, and he could still hear bullets below, and his friends firing nearby, unaware of all this shit. Which really couldn't be happening.

Could it?

"But the spell was never completed, and they were forced to fade away,"

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Jessie said. "Never to become real— An army of the dead, never falling, never failing. They would have led our people to victory, freed our homeland." The smoke men seemed to attend her words.

Mountain George nodded. He said, in that deeper voice that wasn't his, "It can still continue. We shall rise again, not only the red man, but every man oppressed, every man dissatisfied. . . . We shall bring back the plains!"

And Tony saw it, saw it all in his mind. Saw people taking example from the deed today, and rising up. Red men from the reservation. Black men from the ghetto. The children who sat on street corners and knew their lives were meaningless. The guys in the plastics factory, who boiled down beef by-products and watched a horseman ride by. They'd all take up arms, and follow the ghostmen, and turn the country back to plains and forests and sparkling clean rivers. And recreate this Garden of Eden.

And maybe it'd spread, throughout the world. Or maybe it was just a trickster's false promise, and they'd rise up only to be shot down, untold numbers of men and women giving their lives in a futile cry of hope and vengeance.

But that was all right, too. He could see himself riding a spotted pony after buffalo, and he could see himself wearing war paint and riding into a hail of bullets. And they were both good.

"What's gotta be done? How do we complete the spell?" asked Billy Pike.

"You let me kill the last man," said Mountain George.

The old man took shot, real shot, from his pocket, and loaded his Kentucky rifle. Then he lay over the side of the cliff, leaning over and hunting about until he saw Sam Chisholm on his horse. Saw Derek Chisholm on his gray Arab.

"I can't let you shoot no man in the back," said Billy Pike.

"He ain't running out this time," the mountain man replied.

And Billy Pike thought about his parents, and thought about Harper's Ferry, and remembered some farmers who'd been kind to him, and some painters he'd talked with in New York, and some fishermen in Boston. And a church he'd seen in Richmond, and a paddlewheel in St. Louis.

And Tony thought about his dad teaching him to fish, and the taste of a Whopper when the lettuce falls out, all covered with ketchup and mayonaise, and the way the girls looked every Friday, outside the Pizza Hell, and the way a good song sounds, when you crank it up with the windows open at eighty miles an hour.

"I can't let you," he said. "I'm sorry, Mountain George, I can't."

The ghost warriors looked at him with impassive faces, but bodies that pleaded. *Make us real.*

He gripped the other man's rifle barrel. "I can't let you."

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George sat up. "No! I won't let you spoil it again, Billy Pike."

He kept hauling at the Kentucky rifle with one hand, while the other went for his knife.

"Shit!" cried Tony, letting go and leaping away. Mountain George got a funny look on his face. He'd been pulling on the rifle, even while starting to lunge with his buckknife, and when his opponent let go, he had no choice but to go backwards. Over the cliff.

Jessie came to the edge. The battle stopped, everyone either looking down at Mountain George, where he'd landed on the rocks, or up where he'd come from. Derek Chisholm dismounted and knelt by the body.

The girl looked at Tony with ancient eyes. "Last chance, my grandson," she said, and held out a bullet.

"No."

The girl looked over again. "Oh, gross. Like, what happened?"

Then the others were there, faces pale beneath their dusting of black powder. The brothers were staring down at the body, and Jerr just stood there, pushing his hair back out of his eyes repeatedly, leaving little bits of blood on the brown strands. He'd scraped his hands, his drummer's hands, scrabbling back over the rocks.

"Man, I can't believe it," he kept saying. That must be what they were all saying, down below. Come together to recreate the deaths of hundreds, and now immobilized by the death of one. How close they all had come . . .

The professor who was portraying Elmont grabbed Tony by the shoulders. "My God, how'd it happen?" He looked at the girl, too, but she just stared back, a blank.

What could Tony say? *Mountain George was possessed by the real Mountain George, and he and my great-great-great grandmother were going to bring us utopia or death.* Sure. So he shrugged.

"I dunno. He must've been high, or something."

It seemed to satisfy the engineer and Wilshire, all sneery like this was what's bound to happen when people won't listen to him, but his friends came to stand beside Tony.

"Tough luck, man," said Edgar. Sam nodded supportively. They knew that Mountain George had been sort of like a loony uncle to him, and his mom was dead, and his brothers moved out, and his dad on the launch pad too. "The cops're gonna grill us, man, but then tonight we'll go out onto the prairie with some bottles, and our guitars, and the amps, and we'll do his death song, right? We'll give him a send off that'll make the jackrabbits and the coyotes run for cover."

"I can bring my drums," said Jerr. "Hey, Buffalo Ships rides again!"

Tony nodded. "We'll do it. But no old songs. I think I've got a new one, and it's a killer."

Because as he had looked over at the people clustering about Mountain

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George's body, like ants along a popsicle stick, or vultures on a buffalo, a song had come to him. And it was unlike anything he'd ever imagined he could write, and he knew that it could be a gold record.

He had heard the song in its entirety, the strong backbeat, the catchy bass line, the way the guitar wailed on the solo. And he knew that tonight, once he'd written it, he'd never write anything that good again.

"The world doesn't owe me a living
Or so my teacher'd say.
But he doesn't know just what I've done
This heartless evil day."

And, as clearly as Billy Pike had seen a future that did not come, and as clearly as Mountain George had seen a past that never was—that clearly, Tony saw his own future.

He is on stage, guitar shaped like a six-gun, and his band is there too, and the cameramen filming their video. And Tony is singing.

"Nothing's worth it, so you say,
Unless you got a cause."

And while he shouts the lyrics, the kids in the audience are beating their fists against the air and singing the words along with him.

"And you say the world doesn't owe me a living!
You say the world doesn't owe me a living!
You say the world doesn't owe me a living—
and I say— This one does." ●

EXTINCTION

by Michael Bishop

Not until my father died,
did I begin to mourn the dinosaurs.

Birdlike, Dad lay in the ICU
not much like the laughing guy
who'd sometimes played
peek-a-boo & I-see-you
with his laughing kid
in that first innocent year
after the Allies wiped out
every hungry competitor
around our smoke-veiled globe.

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His forelimbs strapped
by terry-cloth tethers
to the rail of his bed,
he moaned around the plastic reed
silently tapping into the acrid
red backlash from his liver.
It wasn't hard to tell
my father was warm-blooded,
a failing endotherm,
even if his Roman nose
had become a Cretaceous beak
and the swell of his lips
a hapless dried-out snapper.

Only a gown away from naked,
he still had some gaudy armor:
His doctors, knowing evolution
would have insufficient time
to make the requisite adjustment,
had jiggled gently down
over his incredulous eyes
an ancient football helmet,
a bucket of Big-Bird yellow.
To its dented white face mask,
they had expertly tied
the pressure-stretched tube
slowly siphoning the crimson
from his flooded bowel.
Trapped in that polymer cask,
Dad was a stunned ankylosaur
in the defensive backfield
of a slow-motion Sudden Death.
When the screen marking the blips
of his heart's hydraulics
ticked down to a zero hum,
his creature knew extinction.

Not until my father died,
did I begin to mourn the dinosaurs.

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NEW WORLDS

by Lawrence Watt-Evans

The author's story collection, *Crosstime Traffic*, will be released in February by Del Rey. Mr. Watt-Evans's most recent sales include stories to *Amazing*, *Aboriginal*, *Analog*, *Weird Tales*, and *IAsfm*.

art: Pat Morrissey

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Dead leaves had accumulated against the fence at the northern boundary of the Myers Starport. Sheltered by the overhanging trees, they had lain undisturbed through the changing seasons.

Now, suddenly, they whirled up from the tarmac and were flung aside. A squirrel that had long since learned to ignore the sound and vibration of the great ships that landed a hundred meters away fled in terror from this strange new phenomenon, scampering back down its tree, safely outside the fence.

Across the field the *Arthur H. Rostron* continued loading, her crew and the port workers oblivious to the tiny disturbance.

Nobody saw the cat-sized, turtle-shaped machine, its metal shell a pebbled matte black, that appeared out of nowhere. A camera lens formed its single eye, a foam-covered microphone projected where a nose should have been, and its tail was a thin black cable that ended in a curiously undefined way. The cable's length varied as the device moved, and an observer would find it impossible to focus on just where it stopped. Half a dozen stubby antennae protruded from various places, as if sniffing the air.

The thing had no legs, but instead crawled forward on a single black plastic caterpillar tread, whirring softly to itself.

The lens swiveled, scanning across the asphalt and concrete, along the kilometers of chain-link fence and the drifts of brown leaves, along the line of sycamores beyond the fence, past the distant, blocky buildings. It stopped when pointed at the *Arthur H. Rostron* and the surrounding service complex, and adjusted the focus.

Machinery buzzed quietly.

Then the turtle turned and retreated, vanishing back into the air, pulling its tail-cable after it.

For a moment, nothing more happened. The squirrel leapt back up onto a fencepole and looked about warily; seeing nothing out of the ordinary, it dropped to the pavement again.

A white-booted foot appeared from the air behind it, and the squirrel fled again, for good this time.

The foot was followed by a leg, and a body, both wrapped in baggy white material. Head and hands emerged, and the figure of a man stood on the tarmac, clad in a bulky protective suit and helmet, with a large pack slung on his back, tools and weapons held in place elsewhere with canvas loops and strips of Velcro. A small microphone was clipped to the base of his helmet, its cord trailing down behind his back and then stopping abruptly in mid-air.

He scanned the area, taking in the fence, the overhanging trees, the distant buildings, the *Arthur H. Rostron* and its attendants. He tapped at the microphone.

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"Sugarman to Base," he said, his eyes fixed on the starship. "I'm through, and everything looks okay, just like the probe showed. Definitely looks like an airport. Some people working, but they haven't noticed me yet. The airplane, or airship, or whatever it is . . . well, first, I only see one on the whole field, and it's nothing like anything I've seen fly—I think we've got some new technology here. Could be big bucks." He glanced around, assuring himself that he had missed nothing important, and then added, "Lee, McDowell, Seibert, come on through, any time you're ready."

He took two paces forward, then turned to watch as three more figures appeared from the air, all clad in the bulky protective suits and broad-visored helmets.

As they looked about themselves with cautious interest the first arrival spoke into the microphone again.

"Looks like we all made it. I'll leave Seibert here with the mike while we scout around a little."

He unclipped the microphone and handed it to the shortest of the group, who clipped it to her own helmet. Sugarman then turned to another and asked, "How's the air?"

The other shrugged. "All the usual caveats, Mr. Sugarman. We're working from a small sample, we can't spot every virus that's out there, even the familiar ones could be mutated into something that'll kill us instantly—you know the drill. There could be anything out there, and we wouldn't necessarily have found it yet. What we *have* found is plain old ordinary air, a bit high in ozone and carbon monoxide compared to what we might like, but no worse than you'd get any number of places back home." He held up a small wire cage, displaying the white mouse inside; the little animal looked no more skittish than any mouse might look when thus exposed. "Herman's breathing just fine, hasn't keeled over, lost his lunch, or even coughed," the man said. "It's your call."

Sugarman nodded. He scanned the area again.

One of the workmen seemed to be looking their way, Sugarman thought.

There were signs on the fence, probably warnings of some sort, but he couldn't read them from this side; they faced out. Nobody was carrying guns, so far as he could see. The fence wasn't electrified, and the single strand of barbed wire at the top didn't look very serious. The trees hadn't been cut back. This might be someplace people weren't supposed to be, but it wasn't any sort of high-security installation.

One had to be ready for absolutely anything, but one also had to know when to take risks, and which risks to take. This world appeared safe enough, and not too different from his own. Looking like invaders from

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Mars was probably not good policy, under the circumstances; it would draw attention.

"What the hell," he said, unzipping the neck-seal of his helmet. "Let's let 'em know we're human, and not a bunch of bug-eyed monsters."

By the time he got the helmet off completely the workman who had first spotted the strangers was pointing and shouting, and others were paying attention as well.

Sugarman took a deep breath; the air seemed just fine. He was almost sorry this particular version of Earth was inhabited.

Those people over there were buzzing about like angry hornets, he thought. Time, he judged, to make some provision for back-up.

He turned and said, "Seibert, when I give the word, step back through the gate and wait in the airlock for ten minutes—by your watch, no rough estimates. Then step back through here and stay by the gate until you hear from us." That would split the party, since he was sure that he and the others would not still be here in ten minutes, but it would give them a contact; in an emergency they could radio Seibert, and she could phone through the gate.

Was there anything else?

"Oh, yeah," he added, as an afterthought, "And take Herman back, we're done with him."

Seibert nodded, and accepted the caged mouse from McDowell. She hung it from a clip on her belt, then glanced back along the microphone cord to see where the opening was.

"Lee, McDowell, you'll stay with me," Sugarman ordered. "And all of you, keep radio silence until *I* tell you otherwise, even if we get separated. There's no privacy on radio, remember that."

The others all nodded in acknowledgment. Sugarman turned back to face the *Arthur H. Rostron,* and the others followed his gaze.

A small wheeled vehicle was approaching across the broad expanse of pavement. It was open, with a flat windshield—Sugarman might have called it a jeep in his own world, but he knew not to assume that similar appearances meant anything here.

Two men were riding in it, one driving, the other holding something that looked distinctly like a weapon.

"Seibert," Sugarman said without looking back, "Now. Tell 'em what's happening."

Seibert stepped back and vanished.

Sugarman and the others stood, waiting. Lee and McDowell had kept their helmets on, so their expressions didn't matter, but Sugarman pasted a smile on his own face and held it as the vehicle came to a stop, about three meters away.

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Always make a friendly first impression, Sugarman reminded himself—an important rule in these preliminary contacts. In most situations, a smile on his face could make up for any number of weapons on his belt.

The driver sat in the vehicle, leaning forward over the steering wheel, and Sugarman noticed a gun—or something very like one—held loosely in one hand.

The passenger stood on a structure that wasn't quite a running board, holding a larger and more obvious gun, and called out angrily, "All right, this is private property. Who the hell are you people supposed to be, and what are you doing inside the fence?"

Sugarman smiled and held a hand up in a friendly wave, pleased that the natives spoke recognizable English. "Hi," he said. "I'm Neil Sugarman, and I'm a representative of the New Worlds Corporation."

"Never heard of it," the passenger snapped. "And I'd suggest you three put up your hands while we talk, and keep them well away from those belts."

Sugarman glanced back at McDowell and Lee and nodded, then put his own hands atop his head. Behind him, the others followed suit.

"Now then," the standing native said, a bit less belligerently, "What are you people doing here?"

"Exploring, I guess you'd say," Sugarman replied. "Just where are we, anyway?"

"You don't know?" the man asked, glaring suspiciously.

Sugarman shook his head, still smiling.

"You're on the outer north blast apron of the Myers Starport."

Sugarman's smile slipped somewhat. "Starport?" he asked.

That couldn't mean what it seemed to. Maybe the language was slightly different here after all, or the name was figurative.

"Starport," the man repeated. "That's the *Arthur H. Rostron* over there, outbound for Epsilon Eridani IV. She's taking off at 1600, whether you're still here or not, and if you *are* here, and you get fried, United Starways isn't responsible, because you're all trespassing."

"Well, now," Sugarman said, trying to gather his wits. The threat of frying didn't worry him, since the sycamores just beyond the fence didn't look scorched, but he was still trying to consider all the ramifications of a ship bound for Epsilon Eridani.

Definitely new technology here, he thought.

"We aren't trying to cause any trouble," he said, "But I think we need to talk to someone in charge. I think we've got ourselves some important business possibilities to discuss."

Any place where an installation like this was private property, and people spoke of corporations not being responsible for damages, was

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clearly set up along economic lines similar to Sugarman's home reality, and that meant they could do business.

"Business?" The passenger looked puzzled; the driver sat up slightly, evincing renewed interest.

"Yes, business," Sugarman repeated. "I think United . . . United Starways, was it?" There it was again—these people had starships. But how could they? A flight would take decades; as a government project that might be feasible, but how could anyone make a profit?

It had to be something entirely new, and potentially valuable to New Worlds. Sugarman tried not to think about how big a bonus he might get for this one.

"Yes," he said, "I think United Starways may be very interested in learning more about the New Worlds Corporation." Not that they would learn all that much, of course—just enough to arrange a trade deal. New Worlds would trade any information they had or could get—except, of course, for their own company secrets, which were what everybody most wanted.

The passenger glared silently for a moment, then said, "You're trying to sell something? A little corporate espionage, or something like that? Maybe the location of a promising planet?"

Now, even with starships going out, how could anyone know the location of a promising planet? That added to Sugarman's confusion, but he mentally shelved the question for the moment. There was no point in thinking about it before he had any hard data. He replied, "I'm not about to talk business out here on a whaddayacallit, blast apron, with my hands on my head."

He stared at the passenger, still smiling.

The standing native chewed his lip, then called, "All right, into the car."

Sugarman led the way.

The starport's spokesman carefully collected all the more obvious weapons—knives, guns, nunchaku—before herding the strangers into the back of the "jeep."

The vehicle was designed to hold six people in all, but the bulky protective suits and backpacks more than made up for the fact that only five were aboard, and the three explorers were uncomfortably crowded during the short drive to the starport offices. Lee used the time to take off her helmet, since Sugarman had as yet shown no ill effects from his exposure to the local environment. McDowell was more conservative, and kept his own helmet on until ordered to remove it by a blue-clad security guard, at the building entrance where they disembarked.

As they clambered from the vehicle and were ushered inside, with

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their helmets in their hands, Sugarman peered back for as long as he could at the looming silver form of the *Arthur H. Rostron.*

A starship, was it? How had these people made such a thing economically practical, when the stars were years, or decades, apart? Was the thing designed for multi-generational voyages?

After some discussion among the security staff, the three explorers were required not only to leave behind their helmets and their gear, but to strip off their protective suits, in front of what appeared to be video cameras. This was to be done before they entered the port manager's office.

They obliged—but even so, after further delays, Lee and McDowell were ordered to wait in an anteroom while Sugarman entered the innermost sanctum alone.

At the door, a security guard told Sugarman to wait for a moment while he was announced. Sugarman stood, waiting politely, and looked about.

The antechamber was utilitarian and uninteresting, except for something sitting in the corner that Sugarman couldn't identify. At first, despite the absence of a pot and the bluish color, he thought it was a plant, but when he saw it move slightly he guessed it was a machine, and finally he decided it was some sort of modernist sculpture.

He certainly couldn't think of anything else it could be, given its location. It had to be the local version of office art.

Interesting that that sort of highly abstract art existed here, he thought, as the guard emerged and beckoned him through the inner door. There might be trade possibilities in that, as well as in new technologies.

Once the visitor was safely inside the inner office the guard departed, and Sugarman found himself facing a heavyset man seated behind a desk. The nameplate on the desk read STEPHEN APPERSON.

"Hi, Mr. Apperson," Sugarman said, holding out a hand and hoping that he wasn't making a fool of himself by the standards of this particular society.

Apperson glared and did not take the hand; Sugarman immediately concluded that this culture was more restrained than his own about handshaking, probably about physical contact of any sort. He quickly tucked the hand into a pocket of his jumpsuit.

"Just what the hell are you people supposed to be?" Apperson demanded. "What's with the suits? And who are you, anyway? Make it quick!"

Sugarman smiled. His host was speaking, anyway, and not using any fancy ritual greetings. Maybe the locals weren't all that friendly, but that was no big problem. They hadn't tried to kill him yet, which was something.

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"Fair enough," he said. "I'm Neil Sugarman, and I'm a scout working for the New Worlds Corporation—and Mr. Apperson, I'm not from your world at all."

Apperson glared, then pulled open the lap drawer of his desk, took out a roll of candy, and threw a mint into his mouth.

He did not offer Sugarman one. Instead, he said, "Sit down," and pointed to a chair against the far wall.

The mint crunched.

Sugarman pulled the chair over and sat down. For a moment the two men sat silently, studying each other. Sugarman maintained a facade of polite calm, while Apperson made no attempt to hide his annoyance.

Sugarman wondered if the candy was just that, or if it were an antacid, or a drug of some sort. If it was supposed to cheer the port manager up, it didn't appear to be working.

It was Apperson who finally spoke.

"All right," he said, "What's going on? You claiming to be an alien? We don't usually get nuts in groups unless they're protesting something, and they don't usually have all the fancy equipment my people said you had, so I figure it's a scam, and I might as well hear your pitch. What's the story? You supposed to be from Lambda Aurigae or something?"

Sugarman hesitated; some of the slang was unfamiliar, and Apperson's accent—one not quite like anything Sugarman had heard before—didn't help.

He got the gist of it, though.

"No," he said, "I'm from Earth. But not *your* Earth. I don't know if your civilization has the concepts I need to explain this, but let me try: Have you ever heard of parallel worlds?"

Apperson chewed on his mint some more before answering.

"You supposed to be from a world where the Nazis won World War II or something?" he asked at last.

Sugarman smiled a bit more genuinely than usual at this proof that the concept *was* known here.

"Nope," he said. "In fact, the Nazis never came to power at all; where I come from. Adolf Hitler—was that the name?" He looked questioningly at the port official.

Apperson nodded.

"Well," Sugarman continued, "He was killed by a thrown beer bottle in 1923, where I come from. But we've found worlds where he and the Nazis *did* win—and we stayed out of them. Nasty places. Not worth the risk, not when there are a million others to explore."

Apperson grimaced sourly.

"Parallel worlds aren't real," he said. "They're just something sci-fi writers made up."

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"*What* writers?" Sugarman asked, startled.

"Sci-fi writers—you know, science fiction."

"Oh," Sugarman said, "Science fiction. We don't call them . . . whatever you said."

"Yeah, well, whatever you call them, parallel worlds are just something they made up."

"Sure—like starships," Sugarman said, grinning.

Apperson didn't reply.

After a moment, recognizing that the next move was his, Sugarman said, "Listen, I can't *prove* anything to you sitting here in your office, but in my equipment pack I've got a pocket video on Schenck's discovery of the crosstime gate, and some of what New Worlds has done with it. I think you'd be interested, and short of taking you back through the gate with me and showing you everything first-hand, I can't think of any better way to convince you."

Apperson thought that over, then nodded. He touched a button on his desk and said, "Carl, bring in Mr. Sugarman's backpack, will you?"

Sugarman gave him a friendly smile; Apperson considered it, then pressed the button again and added, "And have your gun ready when you bring it in. I don't trust this guy."

Sugarman's smile turned wry.

A moment later, a security guard dumped Sugarman's pack on the desk. At Apperson's orders, he kept Sugarman closely covered.

"Get your gadget," Apperson said.

Sugarman gave the gun a good look, and then pulled a black object, roughly the size and shape of a cigar box, from one of the side-pockets on the pack. By the time the guard had hauled the rest of the pack back out of the office, Sugarman had shown Apperson how to work the tape—play, fast forward, rewind, and freeze-frame—and the port manager was studying the display with interest.

Half an hour later he clicked off the power; the screen went dark, and Apperson shoved the little black box away.

"All right," he said, "I'm convinced, for now—I'm no scientist, I just handle administration here, but it looks good to me. Now what?"

"Well," Sugarman said, leaning back, "Now we need to talk about whether it would be profitable for our two worlds to trade with one another. You saw on the video about some of the deals we've made—and some we didn't make, for that matter. You know more about our worlds than we know about yours, so I think it's time for you to tell me a little."

"What's to tell?" Apperson asked, with a shrug. "I can't describe the whole damn universe in fifty words or less. It looks to me like our world is a lot like yours—but different too. I can't tell what the differences are from a twenty-minute tape."

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His words were calm, but Sugarman thought Apperson was worried about something. There was no overt sign, but Sugarman had had plenty of practice in reading people.

The tape was designed to reassure people. It emphasized the limits of the crosstime gates—how they couldn't be aimed, how no two had ever come out in the same reality, how one couldn't be re-opened once it was closed. It was supposed to convince potential customers that they didn't need to worry about Sugarman's people invading them, or spying on them, or opening gates into places they had no business going.

So why was Apperson worried?

Well, the man was confronting a whole new reality—a little nervousness was understandable. Particularly if he didn't believe everything on the tape.

"True enough," Sugarman agreed. "So let me start with something simple. That ship out there, this whole field—this isn't anything I've seen before."

"The ship? You mean the *Arthur H. Rostron?"*

Sugarman nodded. "It's a starship? Bound for Epsilon Eridani, someone said? That's what, eleven light-years?"

"Something like that, yeah. It's a three-week run. She leaves in . . ." He glanced at a digital clock on his desk. "Eight minutes."

Sugarman blinked. "Three weeks?"

Apperson nodded, obviously thinking about something else.

"Twenty-one days to another *star?"* Sugarman asked, struggling against disbelief. He had encountered some amazing things in his crosstime travels, but this was a whole new order of unlikelihood.

Had he reached a universe where the very laws of physics were different?

"Yeah," Apperson said, becoming more interested. "You people don't have a stardrive?" His expression shifted, became calculating.

"Nope. No more than you have crosstime gates."

The two men stared at each other for a moment.

"Listen," Sugarman said, "How is that possible? I mean, faster-than-light travel? Didn't Einstein prove it was impossible here?"

"Sort of," Apperson said, "In normal space. But there are loopholes, ways around that. How'd this Schenck person ever come up with that crosstime stuff?"

"She's a genius," Sugarman answered, shrugging. "How do I know how she did it? But listen, are there other habitable planets out there? I mean, it's not all just rock and ice like the rest of our solar system?"

"Oh, there are plenty of good worlds, and most of them aren't even inhabited. Besides, so far all the extraterrestrials we've found have been harmless enough, anyway. About these parallel worlds, though—that

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tape said that a gate costs millions of dollars, but once it's operating, you just *step through*? I mean, instantaneously?"

"Sure," Sugarman said, "There's no distance involved, after all. But . . . extraterrestrials? You're serious?"

"Of course I am. You didn't see Tcheeb on the way in, in the corner there? I didn't think it had had time to move anywhere. Look, about these gates—do you sell that technology?"

"No, that's a trade secret, I'm afraid, but we have plenty of other things to sell." He glanced toward the door to the antechamber. "That thing in the corner's an *alien*? I saw it, but . . ."

The conversation was interrupted by a weird high-pitched shriek, like nothing Sugarman had ever heard before. It rose quickly to a crescendo, then died away again.

"The ship," Apperson explained, "The *Arthur H.* She's off."

"And the stardrive . . ."

"Company secret."

The two men stared thoughtfully at each other.

"I think," Sugarman said slowly, "That I need to consult with my superiors on this. I mean, we've found new technology before, but a *stardrive*. . ."

"Yeah," Apperson agreed. "I'm just a bureaucrat, I don't make policy. And you could still be faking, somehow—maybe that videotape was all computer-synthesized or something. I need to call corporate in New York."

"Sure." Sugarman wondered whether Seibert, out on the blast apron, had actually been in any danger. He hoped not.

But then, they were all in danger, he realized, remembering the guards' guns.

"Listen," he said, "Can you send me and my two people back to the gate for a few minutes? Radio doesn't transmit through it, and we've got to go back and report in person."

Apperson mulled that over while he ate another mint. He watched Sugarman's face, while Sugarman tried hard not to give anything away. He tried to ready explanations in case Apperson asked to know why all three had to go; he gave serious thought to what he should do if Apperson demanded to keep Lee or McDowell as a hostage.

Of course, neither Lee nor McDowell knew anything about transtemporal theory. They couldn't tell Apperson's people anything, no matter what happened.

"Okay," Apperson said at last, and Sugarman breathed more easily.

Fifteen minutes later, in the back of the starport jeep, Lee leaned over and whispered in Sugarman's ear, "What's going on? We're not going back, are we? We left all the gear . . ."

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Sugarman held up a hand to hush her.

Reluctantly, Lee obeyed. McDowell scanned the horizon, apparently uninterested.

The *Arthur H. Rostron* was gone; the patch of concrete where it had stood seemed to shimmer oddly.

Sugarman wondered if Seibert was all right, and what she had seen.

She was waiting for them at the gate, watching uncertainly, but apparently unhurt; Sugarman supposed she was trying to decide whether or not she should vanish back through again.

Well, he intended to make that quite clear.

Even before the jeep came to a complete halt, Sugarman leapt from his seat and took her by the arm. "Come on," he called to McDowell and Lee.

"Where are you going?" called their driver/escort. "Mr. Apperson didn't . . ."

"It's all right," Sugarman said, with a reassuring wave, "We'll be right back." He shoved Seibert back along the microphone cord and through the gate before she could protest.

McDowell was next, and then Lee, and then Sugarman himself. He took a last look at the Myers Starport, and saw the driver climbing from his vehicle, a worried expression on his face.

Probably thought he'd catch hell for this, Sugarman thought. He didn't need to worry, though; Sugarman was quite sure that Apperson wouldn't mind.

Then Sugarman was through the gate and back in the reassuringly familiar airlock on the homeworld side. He herded his team toward the exit and slapped at the red emergency button.

"Blow the gate!" he called, "Blow it!"

He was barely through the #2 hatch when the transtemporal field collapsed with a roar of displaced air, and the opening to the Myers Starport closed forever.

Amanda Brewer, the project director, called down to him from the observation balcony, "That's eight million bucks we just threw away on your say-so, Sugarman!"

His teammates were standing before him; Lee and Seibert were staring at him.

"Neil," Lee said, "I don't get it. It looked fine to me!"

"Yeah," Seibert said, "What was wrong with it? And did you see that ship take off? What *was* that?"

"That's all proprietary information, as of right now," Sugarman said, "And I can't tell you."

"Was it something that Apperson told you?" Lee asked.

"Sorry, I can't . . ." Sugarman began.

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"So come and tell *me,* Sugarman!" Brewer called down. "I want you in my office five minutes ago."

Five minutes later Brewer and Sugarman were seated on opposite sides of Brewer's desk.

"We've blown gates before," Brewer said, "Because of crazies like the Nazis, or environments like that one where they'd nuked everything with cobalt bombs. You know that. But I think you forget sometimes, Sugarman, that we don't *like* blowing them. So why'd we shut *this* one down? What was the threat to human civilization in this world?"

"It wasn't a threat to human civilization," Sugarman admitted, "Only to *us*—to New Worlds."

"Go on," Brewer said, "What kind of a threat?"

"Economic," Sugarman said. "These people had interstellar travel."

Brewer tapped a felt-tip pen against her desk. "Sugarman," she said, "You better explain that."

"They have faster-than-light travel, Ms. Brewer. Three weeks to Epsilon Eridani."

"So?"

"So which would you rather have, Ms. Brewer—a way to reach other Earths, the way we do, or a way to reach really *new* worlds? Which do you think is more valuable, a way to find all the mirror images of ourselves we could ever want, or a way to find entirely new intelligences? They've got *aliens,* Ms. Brewer—extraterrestrials. We've found new societies, but they have whole new *species.* Who needs the competition?"

Brewer frowned. "Would we have to compete?"

"You know the regulations we work under—we couldn't have kept a stardrive under wraps. We'd have to let this United Starways expand into our reality, or license the technology—and you can bet we wouldn't get the license! Sure, we'd still have the gate for ourselves—but who's going to want to pay us to use the gates if they can build starships and find whole new planets?"

Brewer considered that.

"I'm not sure," she said. "It might have been worth the risk."

"It was a judgment call," Sugarman admitted.

"You may have just thrown away the biggest new technology we've found yet," Brewer pointed out.

Sugarman shrugged. "Maybe I did," he agreed. "But hey, now that we know it can be done, maybe we can find it for ourselves, and not have to share it."

Brewer nodded thoughtfully.

In his office in the Myers Starport, Stephen Apperson listened carefully

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as his men swore they could find no trace of the strangers or the aperture that they had vanished through.

Finally he nodded. "Good," he said. "I was afraid we might have to . . . *dispose* of them, somehow, but apparently they got scared and ran. Cowards, I'd say—they've done it before. According to this," he said, with a wave at the black video box that Sugarman had left on the desk, "They can't re-open the path once it's gone. Which world they hit each time they open a gate is supposedly random, can't be controlled. So if the gate's gone, *they're* gone, for good.

"Which means we don't need to worry about competition from a system with zero travel time, instead of weeks aboard ship, and where most of the worlds found are habitable, not dead rocks."

He threw another mint into his mouth and considered the video box.

"Of course, now that we know crosstime travel is *possible* . . ." he said.

He didn't finish the sentence.●

SONG OF THE MARTIAN CRICKET

(for Marilyn)

I shouldn't come out here
so many nights, turning
my faceplate to the black sky
with the tasteless, artificial air,
whispering in and out of my lungs—
the only sound besides the directional beep
from Marsbase below, a subaudial promise
of security, but not comfort.
It's not the pressure suit I mind
so much, not even the bottomless
black bucket of stars—I miss the moon
pregnant with promise, and the light,
grassy breeze coasting over the hill
to blow the soft strands of your hair
across my lips, and the sound of crickets
grinding their legs with need. Still,
I come out too often and stare
into the abyss of years, then rise,
feeling almost bodiless in the low gravity,
and drift back to the floodlit dome
small and forlorn beneath
its protective covering of dust.

—David Lunde

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Christmas Father

by Robert Frazier & James Patrick Kelly

"Silver bells can go to hell.
Turn that music down;
I'm dead, not deaf!"

Daddy was just a repro, you know
but this year we scanned the last of him in
old license photos & shopping lists
all the hair samples
and after our apartment sorted it
we eggnogged & watched him surge to life
fully interactive technicolor

"Remember we'd cut blue spruces?
They smelled clean as mountains
before the needles dropped.
Oh Tannenbaum, my ass.
Chop a tree now
and they shoot you."

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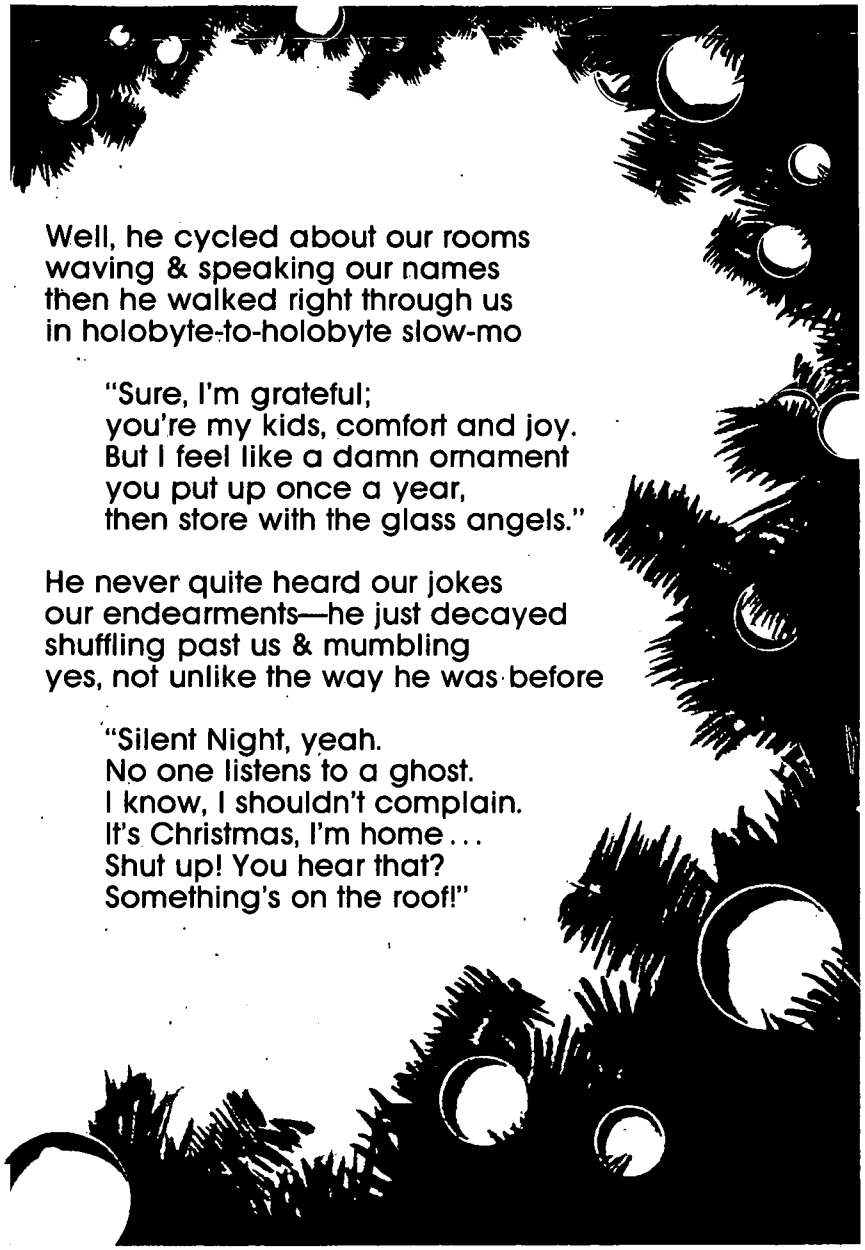

Well, he cycled about our rooms
waving & speaking our names
then he walked right through us
in holobyte-to-holobyte slow-mo

"Sure, I'm grateful;
you're my kids, comfort and joy.
But I feel like a damn ornament
you put up once a year,
then store with the glass angels."

He never quite heard our jokes
our endearments—he just decayed
shuffling past us & mumbling
yes, not unlike the way he was before

"Silent Night, yeah.
No one listens to a ghost.
I know, I shouldn't complain.
It's Christmas, I'm home...
Shut up! You hear that?
Something's on the roof!"

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FELLOW AMERICANS

by Eileen Gunn

Eileen Gunn takes a quirky look at American history as it never was. "Fellow Americans" will also be appearing in Mike Resnick's *Alternate Presidents* anthology (Tor, January 1992).

". . . And now, the man you *loved to hate,* the man you *loved too late,* the man *every*one loves to *second-guess,* America's own *Tricky Dick!"*

Applause, and the strains of "Let Me Call You Sweetheart." A tanned, well-groomed man in a blue blazer and grey slacks walks between the curtains.

He raises his hands above his head in the familiar double V-for-Victory salute to acknowledge the applause, then gestures for quiet.

"Thanks for the hand, folks." His voice is deep, quiet, and sincere. "You know, I needed that applause today." A catch in his throat. "Right before the show, I was on my way down here to the studio . . ." He shakes his head slightly, as if contemplating the role that Chance plays in Life. "An elderly lady came up to me, and she introduced herself, and then she said, 'Oh, Dick, I'm so pleased to meet you, you know you were my all-time favorite presidential candidate . . .' " He lets the compliment hang there a second, as if savoring it. " '. . . after Jack Kennedy, of course.' "

The audience laughs, appreciating the host who can tell a joke at his own expense. When the laughter has diminished, but before it stops completely, he continues.

"Speaking of politics, why is everybody picking on Dan Quayle these days?" He looks from face to face in the audience, as if for an answer. "He hasn't done anything." An artful pause. "And, as I know from my own turn at the job, he probably won't get to do anything in the future, either." More laughter, stronger.

He holds up a hand to stop them. "Seriously, folks, just the other day I was sharing a story with Dan—a story about two brothers." His voice is soft, as if confessing a family secret. "One ran away to sea and the other grew up to be elected vice-president. . . ." He hunches his shoulders and looks down at the floor, shaking his head pensively. "Neither one of them was ever heard from again," he adds lugubriously. The audience howls with laughter and applauds enthusiastically.

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The Governor of New York City looked out the small round window at the top of the ten-story Tower of Diminished Expectations and, through dirty glass, surveyed the 1990 New York World's Fair. He and Ethel had walked the 280 stairs to the top, and they were more than slightly out of breath.

Their hostess, a lovely young woman in a miniskirted uniform and a startlingly authentic retro-Sixties bubble haircut, pointed out the three festival areas they had just toured—the glass and steel pavilions of the Private Sector, the workaday plastic stucco of the Public Sector, and the tattered, colorful tents of the makeshift Alternative Fair.

The Private Sector, a promotional crankshaft for the wheels of industry, included the Minamata Pavilion, an entire building made from the byproducts of engineered bacteria raised on toxic waste; MacRainforest, a model cattle ranch from the Amazon; and Weyerhaeuser's Walking Woods, a moving strip of biotope that rolled past onlookers as robot animals sang about the delightful variety of life in a clear-cut woodland.

In contrast, the Public Sector presented a cluster of low-budget homilies on the virtues of self-sufficiency and making-do-with-less—preparing people to live in a world of survivable nukes, reduced government services, lowered wages and raised taxes. Its highlights were a low-level nuclear waste dump, which was built right on the site and would be entombed there after the Fair closed, and a mammoth exhibit on Local Empowerment, made entirely by grade school children out of papier mâché.

The Alternative Fair was an amorphous bunch of whole-earthers and punk-what-have-yous that had cadged land next to the Fair for their tent city and claimed to feed three thousand homeless people a day on the waste from the Fair's restaurants. Though the organizers maintained an aura of anonymity, the Governor suspected that more than one of his younger kids was involved. More power to them, he thought.

Behind him, the troop of wheezing reporters who had followed them up the stairs pushed into the room. The torrent of questions started.

"Governor Kennedy, do you have any comment on the proceedings against you?"

"Sir, will you be testifying in your defense?"

"No comment on that right now, folks," he said with a reflexive smile, and started back down the steps at a hearty pace.

When he got to the bottom, he paused for just a second. "You know," he said, for the benefit of the reporters braking to a stop behind him, "this tower reminds me of George Bush's budgeting procedure. You go around and around and around, and you end up just south of where you started."

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Most of them laughed and some of them jotted it down. Flashbulbs popped. Leaving the tower, considerably ahead of Ethel, the guide, and the pack of reporters, he tried not to scan the crowd. There was no use worrying about it. He walked through the mass of people, waving, nodding to individuals, lightly touching people's shoulders.

There was a commotion to his right, and a slight, dark-haired man moved forward abruptly and shot him, point-blank, in the side.

●

"Just as well you're not hooked up to the lie detector yet, Dick," says Ed McMahon, shaking his head and chuckling, "or I'd make you confess who you stole those jokes from."

"Well, enough of this then, Ed, let's get me hooked up and get this show on the road!" He gives a lurching shrug and waves his forearms around stiffly. The audience loves it.

"Who are our guests today, Ed?" he asks as two young ladies in skimpy nurse outfits lead him to the dais between the two panels of contestants.

"Well, Dick, our guests today on the Republican side are . . . Zsa Zsa Gabor . . . and Arnold C. Hammurabi of Seattle, Washington. . . . And, on the Democratic side, Dick Van Dyke . . . and Ms. Suzanne Ackerly of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, back for her fifth week. Arnold, why don't you tell us a little about yourself?"

As Arnold talks, the nurses strap the lie detector to Tricky Dick.

Dick gives a brief, funny, and patently false weather report, allowing the participants to test their handsets. On the dais in front of each contestant, a colored panel shows how the contestant rates Tricky Dick's truthfulness. The panel changes through the spectrum from true blue for truth to choleric red for outright lies.

Home viewers can see an additional panel that shows how the lie-detector rates Tricky Dick's truthfulness. It doesn't think much of the weather report, that much is clear.

●

The former president, retired now since 1973, stood in the doorway of his desert home and looked out across the city to watch the early morning sun strike the distant red and ocher arroyos.

Phoenix had been all rutted roads and ditches when he was a boy. In place of the dry-dirt farms that had taken water from the Salt and Verde rivers, there were now mammoth hydroponic farm-domes, controlled from glass towers, sucking in desalinated seawater from a pipeline and spewing forth tasteless vegetables. Suburban homes looked down from the mountains; each identical 4-level home had its desal pool and its automated repair shop for the owner's helicopter and 2.6 cars.

Slowly and carefully, he drew in his mind a picture of the surrounding

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land as it would have been without the interference of the white man. He imagined the land stripped of the crust of human domination, cleaner even than it had been in his childhood. It looked good that way.

Glad I kept this old house, he thought. Happier here than in one of those damn futurama things. He walked slowly down the path to the hot tub, his cane making dull tapping sounds on the slate-blue flagstone. A good soak would ease the pain he felt in his knees, elbows, back, the artificial hips, all over, really. Where do these random stabs come from, he wondered. Now the left wrist, a really sharp one. Nothing the matter with the wrist—it'll still open jars—just a mean shot of pain right now. A reminder I'm still alive, I guess.

He tapped across the redwood deck to the tub, shed his yukata, and, gripping the bars, lowered himself into the water. It was hot all right.

The pain was seeping away from his joints. He settled down further into the water and leaned his head back against the cedar rim of the tub. Quiet, this time of day, just the occasional clinking of dishes off at the kitchen end of the house as his housekeeper Lillian got the breakfast ready.

After breakfast, he had to meet with the crew from that PBS show, "Geraldo's Manifest Destinies." Wasn't really sure why he'd agreed to do this—except Haldeman thought it would help with fundraising for the museum. Always was uncomfortable with the primping you had to do for television. Now that running for office was happily behind him, all he needed was a blowdryer on the topknot and a little light makeup he could do himself.

Might even be fun to get someone out here—it had been kind of lonely since he finished his memoirs. He had no political agenda, just a little harmless PR puffery for the presidential museum to get those contributions rolling in. Guess he could spout off on just about any old subject he wanted, and let the chips fall where they may.

Birds were making a small racket at the feeder. Got to figure out how to keep those damn robins from eating all the seed before the doves and quail get to it. . . .

Lillian had left his *Washington Post* within reach, but he wasn't sure he wanted to know what was in it. Wouldn't be good news. AIDS, oil spills, violence. Bleeding heart editorials about the homeless.

Maybe I should just cancel the damn thing and stick to *Popular Mechanics*. Nah, he thought. Bite the bullet. Find out what they're saying back there.

He unfolded the paper. No major stories this morning.

"Noriega Trial Delayed." They'll never bring him to trial. Too many buried bodies.

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"Rad Babies Denied Entrance From Mid-East." Tough call. Damned if you do and damned if you don't.

"Federal Judge Finds Rap LP Obscene." What's the world coming to? Who listens to this stuff?

Inside, the headlines were even less involving.

"RFK to Run in '92?" Nah. Never gone for the big job, never will.

"New Season for 'Tricky Dick.' " Twenty years that thing's been on the air, about time he retired, wasn't it? Funny thing about Nixon—wouldn't have thought he'd make it on TV in any way, shape, or form. But some peculiar inability to concede defeat had led him to confront the medium and master it. Just as well he hadn't taken the same approach to politics. Never did trust the man.

He flipped quickly to the editorial pages, guaranteed to raise his blood pressure.

"Politics as Usual?" read the head on the lead editorial.

> Negative political advertising is nothing new. The present trend of sleazy innuendo started with the notorious 1964 campaign that drove Lyndon Johnson from office. But the current spate of smarmy sensationalism, everyone seems to agree, is the dirtiest yet, exceeding even the harsh 1988 campaign of—

Sonofabitch. All that stuff about Johnson was true, dammit. Sure, Ailes made the most of it, but there's no law against that—that's what a PR guy is for. Doggonit, the best thing about starting the day off with the *Post* was that it could only get better.

●

Members of the audience raise their hands to ask questions, chosen beforehand for their originality, sincerity, and capability of being answered with a lie.

The first few are too easy. "Do you agree with Andrew Jackson that there are no necessary evils in government?" "Do you think the US should trust the Russians?" With questions that cut and dried, everybody can pretty much agree when Tricky Dick is lying and when he is telling the truth.

The best kind of questions for the show, all the regular watchers agree, are questions that result in an emotional reaction of some kind as well as a factual answer, or questions that bring forth an elaborate anecdote. This is where Tricky Dick is an artist with fact and fiction, heartfelt appeal and outright lie.

●

The living room had been radically rearranged by stylists from the Geraldo show, and now the two men, former president and respected PBS

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commentator, sat waiting in carefully angled armchairs positioned in front of a wall of books and kachina dolls. Geraldo's sculptured features were passive, his eyes blank. He got the signal to start, sprang vibrantly to life, and addressed the camera: "Rad babies! AIDS! Mutant rats! Is *this* the man responsible? We'll be back in just two minutes." The network cut to announcements, and Geraldo turned off again. A makeup girl appeared next to him, pushed a recalcitrant tuft of mustache into place, and misted it with a tiny can of hairspray.

Always hated this part of politics, thought the former president. Won't say I was born too late, but I'm damned sure I wasn't born a minute too soon—never be able to stand the rigmarole that politicians have to go through now.

The camera was back, and Geraldo revived again: "For better or worse, tactical nukes are now a way of life in troubled parts of the world. These baby bombs, first deployed by our guest today during the Viet Nam war, are easy to use and tough to clean up after. What do you say, Barry, can we lay this mess at your doorstep?"

"Well, as I've said before, Geraldo, I wasn't the only one involved in deciding to use these weapons, but I accept responsibility for the decision, yes."

"I guess we know you stand behind your use of nukes in Viet Nam, but don't you feel a little guilty about the millions of deaths that have resulted from the proliferation of these weapons?"

"As far as that goes, Geraldo, I think you have to look on these things as being the natural result of a free market econom—"

"Thanks, Barry. We'll be back with more, after these messages."

Why did I agree to do this, wondered the former president. Haldeman's got some explaining ahead of him.

●

A young man in the audience, hair a little long but neatly combed, raises his hand: "Sir, can you tell us, did you ever take LSD in the Sixties? If so, what was it like for you?"

The familiar hollow vowels: "I'm glad you asked me that question." Running a hand over the top of his head. "As a matter of fact, the truth is,"—Tricky Dick's voice becomes dramatically husky—"yes, I have taken LSD." A subdued murmur of anticipation from the audience: what a great question!

"Of course, this was before it was declared illegal. I am not a— I've always believed in law and order.

"It began—it was some time back around 1965, after Pat and I had moved back to California. We had some, uh, show business friends, who had, who had experimented with LSD. Pat and I were going through a period of . . . of withdrawal from politics, and our friends thought it might

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help us, uh, make our peace with our destinies, if we took some of this LSD." He takes a deep breath. "Let me tell you what happened." The camera zooms in on his hands: he's wringing them nervously. "We arranged for this fellow to come to our house, to be our 'guide,' and he gave us two little white pills. This cost about three hundred dollars, which was a lot of money back then, as you might remember. Well, Pat and I just looked at each other. We were nervous, but we'd come this far, and we were determined to see it through.

"So we swallowed them, with the help of a little chocolate milk. Then we sat on the floor and listened to Leonard Bernstein records for a while. Pat took off her shoes, and I first loosened my tie, then took it off entirely."

As he relaxes into the story, Tricky Dick seems to confide in the audience. "Well I tell you, I didn't feel like my usual cocky, confident self there. I was full of restless energy. I fidgeted. I started to feel *very* uneasy. Then I realized that the problem was that I had no control over what was going to happen to me. I was accustomed to having control over even the smallest things in my life. And you know, my fath— my upbringing was such that I believed that a man had to be in control at all times.

"But as I struggled to remain calm, I realized that I did have a choice: I could relinquish control or continue to fight for it with the drug.

"I decided I would voluntarily give up control, and I made a gesture of giving, giving control over to the drug. At that moment a great peace descended on me, and I felt as though I had passed into another dimension. I cried freely, letting the tears run down my cheeks—and yet, I felt very happy, and I was smiling."

●

Eventually the reporters left the room and the Governor of New York City lit a cigarette and leaned back against the pillows. It was okay to light one, he told himself, as long as he just held it. He lifted it to his lips. As long as he didn't inhale, he amended. He didn't inhale. He couldn't, really, they had him strapped so tightly around the chest.

"Governor!" It was the day nurse. "What do you think you're doing?"

. . . She was right. "Damn," he said. "Wasn't thinking. Sorry." He handed her the cigarette.

Mollified, the nurse, an attractive blonde woman with grey streaks in her hair, smiled at him. "Your wife's on her way over, Governor."

" 'Bout time." He sure didn't feel great just now. They'd pushed it too close, letting the guy get off a shot. Could have shot him in the head, for Chrissake. He didn't want to blink out the way Jack had—too suddenly to put things in order, make proper goodbyes, say the things left unsaid. Though he wouldn't want to hang on for a decade like his father, either,

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tubes plugged into him at both ends, bringing stuff in at the top and taking it out at the bottom.

He wasn't ready to check out yet at all, thank you very much. At sixty-five, he still had the time and stamina to run for president. He could win, too, and he could do the job.

Funny, though, as a kid, he'd always been happiest in the supporting role. He could have done it for Jack, if things had worked out differently. And in '64, if that son-of-a-bitch Johnson had supported him for VP, he'd have taken it. They'd have beaten Goldwater, in spite of Ailes and his dirty tricks, dragging out the Jenkins thing and Johnson's past. . . .

"Hey, Ace, how you feelin'?" It was Ethel.

"I hurt like hell, is how I feel," he said. "What the fuck happened there?"

His wife turned to the nurse. "You can take a break now, if you'd like. I'll take care of him if he needs anything." The woman nodded and left them alone.

"I've just been hashing that over with your boys," said his wife. "After sticking to that guy like a second skin for three weeks, while he shadows you and buys the gun and writes like crazy in his diary, they lose him in the crowd at the last minute, just inside the gate."

"Jeez."

" 'Jeez' is right. This was a totally screwy idea. He could have killed you, vest or no vest."

"Well, he didn't. Don't borrow trouble. This is worth millions in press sympathy."

"What are you planning to do?" she asked sarcastically. "Announce you're running for president tomorrow, as you're released from the hospital?"

He answered seriously. "No, timing's all wrong. With the off-year elections coming up, the story would be old news real fast. But I'll be dropping some hints in the next few weeks, and by, say, January of next year, I should be ready to make a definite statement. . . ."

"You're out of your mind," she said. "Next time, they won't miss."

He turned on the television across from the bed. "It's time for 'Tricky Dick.' "

"I know you don't hear a word I'm saying."

"We've already missed the opening monologue."

"I suppose you've got to do it, so go ahead, Bob," she said. "I don't have to like it. But next time you uncover a plot, have them pick the guy up right away, okay?"

The next president of the United States looked up at his wife and nodded his head. "I think I'll do that." He took her hand, and she curled up next to him on the bed to watch the show.

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Tricky Dick's lips are pursed, his eyes slightly unfocused: he's transfixed by his own story.

". . . then I was the captain of a submarine, steering my vessel through seas populated by my enemies, watching them through the periscope, confident, knowing that not one of them knew where I was. Suddenly, I realized that I was the *submarine,* not the captain! For a moment, I wondered: who's the captain? who's the captain? and then I realized that I was *both* the captain *and* the submarine! And I was the sea as well, and the enemy ships! It was all a cosmic game, and we are all one, all the gameplayers and the game itself."

His voice deepens. "Well, I knew this was a really important insight, and I started to write it down, but just then I looked over and saw that Pat was weeping quietly under the grand piano. I realized that she was having a 'bad trip.'

"I piloted my sub over under the piano and extended my periscope, which was also my hand, toward her.

"She looked up at me, her eyes dimmed with tears, and as we looked at one another, I realized that she knew exactly what I was thinking, about the submarine and all, and that she'd been crying for each of us, the whole world, in our separate submarines, not knowing that we were really all part of the same game, all one, and I said to her, 'You know, don't you?' And she nodded, without speaking, because she didn't need to speak, she didn't need to say one word, she just needed to know, and she knew.

"Of course, afterward when we talked about it, I found out that she had been crying about all the music trapped in the piano, but on some level I think she really *did* know. You know?"

●

The Governor of New York City, propped up against the pillows of his hospital bed, laughed out loud. Stories like this were exactly the sort of thing that he tuned in to hear. The master, he thought, was not losing his touch.

●

The retired president hit the sound button on his controller and watched the people on the screen move their mouths ridiculously.

The son of a bitch looks *happy,* he thought, happy and healthy. Getting a little jowly, maybe, but I'll bet he still plays a couple of rounds of golf a week.

What does a guy like that think about? How could he turn his back on it all? Not so much on power—you don't get the power you think you'll have as president—but on the chance to change the course of history.

Could I have kissed it goodbye, he wondered, if things had worked out

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a little different? Stayed with the department store, maybe, or gone into some kind of commercial flying?

Nah, never.

He thought about these things a lot, now that Peggy was gone. Hadn't spent enough time with her and the kids, it was true. When he retired after his eight years, he had his flying, his ham radio, his photography. He'd figured that there'd be plenty of time, once he was too old to fly, to sit around with Peggy and watch "Tricky Dick" on the tube. How little we know. Peggy's probably happier where she is now, he thought wryly. She never cared much for TV, and she'd always hated politics.

●

In the evening, after dinner, the TV celebrity and former vice-president wandered out onto his magnificent deck, and admired his spectacular view of the Pacific Ocean. The sun had set some time ago, and the sky, red at the horizon, shaded upward through a few dark wisps of cloud to clear yellow-green, to pale blue, and then to purple. Rather like the lie detector readout, he thought. The first stars were beginning to appear, and Jupiter was bright in the West.

Pat, martini glass in hand, came out from the livingroom and took his arm. "Dan and Marilyn must be wondering what's happening, Dick," she said. "You just up and walked out."

"I was just thinking," her husband replied, "what a great night it would be to just sit out here in the hot tub, under the stars. Tell them to get their drinks and come on out."

"Dick, are you out of your mind? We barely know them. Besides, they're from the Midwest."

"Aw, let's get them out here. Let's give them a taste of the real California." He crossed the deck to the livingroom door. "You folks grab your drinks and come on out here," he called. "Don't you worry," he said to his wife in a low voice, "this'll be fun."

Dan and Marilyn came out onto the deck, smiling and politely curious.

"Beautiful night," said Dan. "What a view."

"Those flowers smell wonderful," said Marilyn.

"That's nicotiana, tobacco plant," said Pat. "It blooms at night, and it does have a heavenly scent."

"Have we shown you round the deck?" Dick asked, moving toward the steps that led down to the hot tub.

He remembered the first time he'd sat naked in a hot tub with other people, back in the Sixties. He'd felt very vulnerable, very awkward. Even now, he had to admit, it didn't feel completely natural. But there was something exhilarating in overcoming those feelings and, he had to be honest with himself, it was sort of fun to get new people to take off their clothes.

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"On nights like this," he said, "we generally bring our drinks down here to the hot tub, just sit out here, smell the flowers, and get in touch with our feelings."

"Not so different from D.C.," murmured Marilyn. "Except we usually just fax any messages for our feelings."

Dick's twitchy smile flashed for just a second.

●

Of the four people in the hot tub, Dick thought, I'm the only one who's truly at ease. The thought didn't bother him.

The other man looked around nervously—not quite sure what to do with his eyes. His wife was cooler, a tough cookie with brains and backbone, but even she was holding herself a bit lower in the water than strictly necessary. And Pat, as usual, was embarrassed—more with his blatant powerplay than with casual nudity. She's come a long way from the prim housewife of the Fifties, he thought.

"So tell me about the Mars mission, Dan," he said. "That's your pet project, isn't it?"

Dan had the look of a golden retriever, and now Dick had tossed him a bone. He splashed a little and gave a self-assured smile.

"That's right, sir—uh, Dick. Fascinating planet, Mars." He searched for something to say.

Dick waited. He'd learned to let the other guy flail about in the game of conversational tennis.

"Could be a very important mission," Dan added helplessly. "We have seen pictures where there are canals, we believe, and water. If there is water, there is oxygen. If oxygen, that means we can breathe."

"Really, Dan?" said Pat, astonished.

Marilyn laughed gaily and winked at Pat. "Don't let him pull your leg," she said. There was a movement in the water, and Dick realized that it was Marilyn putting her foot on top of her husband's. Dan responded with a shake of the head and a big golden-retriever grin.

"Sorry, ma—uh, Pat. Most of this stuff's classified."

Marilyn laughed again. "Danny likes to have his fun with the Mars stuff," she said. "Most of it's just a lot of technical jargon at this point—the usual logistical discussions—really pretty boring."

Dan nodded obediently.

"But you know, Dick," she said, "one of the things you might find interesting is this—they're implementing a biofeedback training program for the mission, to help the participants control their breathing rates and body functions in an emergency."

Dick looked at her. The archness in her voice—she was driving at something.

She continued. "I've heard you've had some training in this?"

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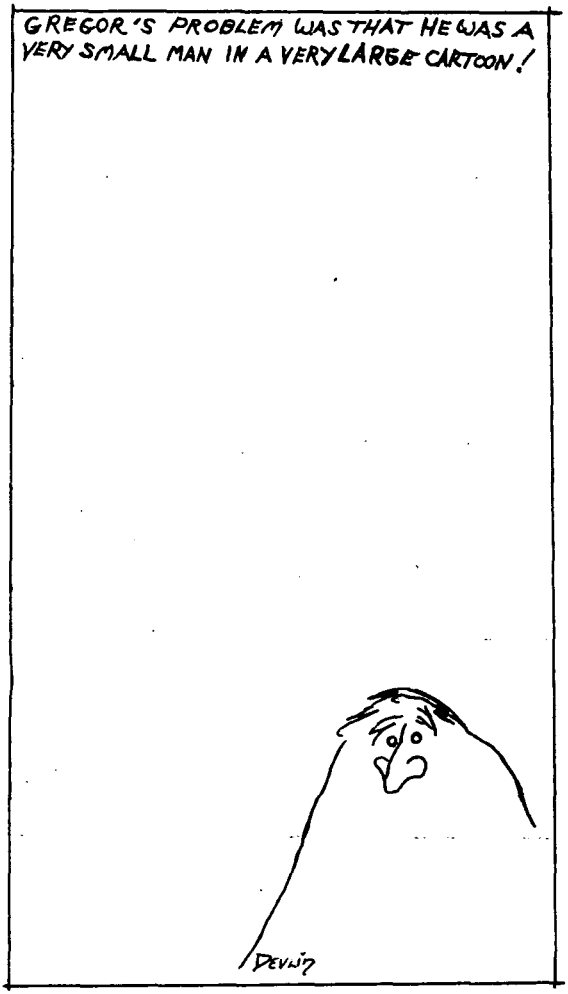
He leaned back against the edge of the tub. "Well, way back in the Sixties, of course," he said. "Just about everybody I know did."

"So what's the story," she asked coolly. "Does it help you fool the lie detector?"

"Lie detector?" He was amused. "Lie detector?" he repeated. These political people. He was so glad he was out of Washington. "Marilyn," he said, "this is television. We don't *need* lie detectors." And again he flashed his famous crooked grin.●



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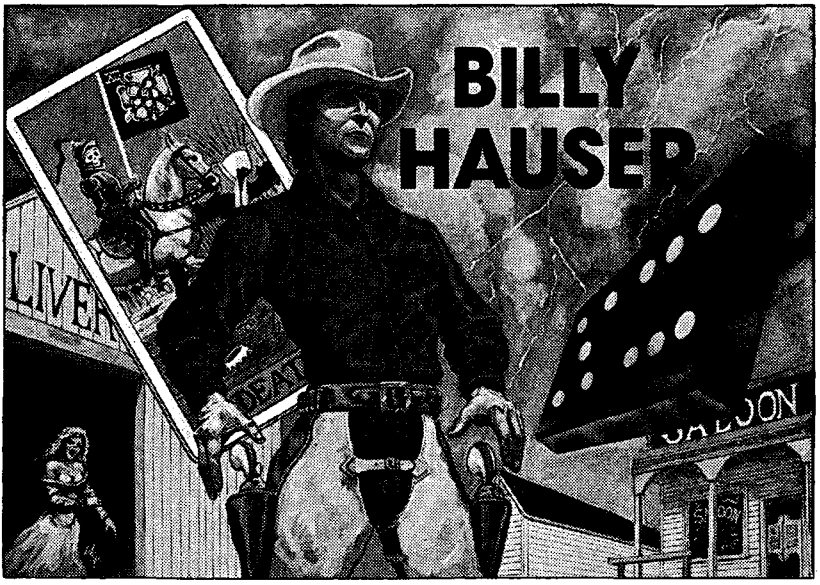
Don Webb, whose classic Western "Jesse Revenged" (*IAsfm*, December 1986), brought the James brothers—Henry and William—out of retirement to settle the score with "that dirty little coward," Robert Ford, returns to the Wild West to investigate the mystery of...



art: Will Brown

by Don Webb

The dusty streets of Amarillo lay still. Tired cowboys drank warm bourbon on the wide steps of the Amarillo Hotel. Vultures circled the city, their forms wavering in the thermals. Horses slept. Rosa told fortunes. A young man limped his way toward town, walking on the railroad tracks. He wore a costume new to the 1890s: white Stetson, blue satin shirt, black pants, white leather chaps, ivory-handled six-shooters. The first Midnight Cowboy, here on a September noon. Somewhere a harmonica played.

When he got a hundred yards from the station, Rosa spotted him through her tentflap. She flipped over the thirteenth trump, Death. The harmonica stopped. The sheriff looked up from his fortune at the young man. The young man tripped on a tie and fell in the boneless manner of infants. The sheriff rushed to the fallen. Rosa gathered her cards. She already had the dime.

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The sheriff yelled and the bored cowpokes gathered round. "Get the doc," and somebody got the doc, who was well into his midafternoon stupor. The doc had them carry the fancypants to the lobby of the Amarillo Hotel. The doc splashed some whiskey on the innocent face and the young man rose. He said, "iwanttobeagunslingerlikemyfatherwas"

"Whoa, hold up there son."

"Iwanttobe agunslingerlike myfatherwas"

"Slower, boy, easy now. Have a whiskey."

And the kid looked at the whiskey as though it were something new, something unknown, and marvelous. He took the shot glass and swallowed it all at a gulp. Then he coughed, spit, and danced 'til he'd brought the whiskey up in a fine spray over the bystanders.

"He must be a Yankee."

"Must be a foreigner. Look at how he's dressed."

"He's from one of them airships like crashed at Aurora."

"Who are you, son?"

"I want to be a gunslinger like my father was." The kid smiled. He'd got it right.

"Gunslingin's no life for a boy," said the sheriff. "Where you from?"

"I want to be a gunslinger like my father was I want."

"He's crazy from the heat."

The kid handed his shot glass to the bartender. He started to speak again—thought better of it and pulled out two letters. The sheriff pocketed them quick-like.

The sheriff said, "Doc, why don't you and me and the kid here mosey over to the jail and have a little talk."

The cowpokes hated the sheriff for hogging the mystery, but a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. The harmonica started again.

The first letter was addressed to John Wesley Hardin. The sheriff hadn't worn that name in sixteen years. How had they found him? He felt like a stagehand suddenly illuminated in the spotlight. The faded creased letter read:

> Dear John,
>
> This here is my son. His father rode with you. I don't know his father's name, but I remember when you rode into town. You's the famous one. You's the one to train him for the life he's gonna lead. I'm returning to my family back East. Please take care of him. Raise him like his blood calls for.
>
> God bless

It was unsigned.

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The second letter was newer—written in an angled hand influenced by book letters. It was addressed to "Whom It May Concern":

> Dear to whom,
>
> I've brought up little Billy here as my own child, but the needs of my ten other children are so pressing that I must abandon the little tyke and hope he finds happiness in an honest and honorable profession.

The sheriff sat on one side of Billy, the doc on the other. They tried rotation, they tried shouting, they tried tough cop and soft cop. All they ever got was "I want to be a gunslinger like my father was."

They handed him pen and paper and he wrote:

Billy Hauser
Billy Hauser
Billy Hauser
Billy H

and they took the paper away.

When night came the sheriff lit a candle. Billy tried to pick the flame up. As Billy sucked his fingers, the sheriff reached a decision.

"Well, I guess we'll have to send him to the schoolmarm. The school year's starting and this boy needs learning." The sheriff wanted to show Miss Wyatt how well he handled anomalies.

It was 1897, and Greece and Turkey were at war over Crete, German troops occupied Kiaochow, and Americans had been seeing mysterious airships for months. One had crashed in the city of Aurora, in Hidalgo County, Texas on April 17. A small nonhuman body and maps in "an unknown language" were found. A U.S. Signal Corps officer pronounced the pilot "from Mars." For details, see the Dallas *Morning News* for April 19, 1897. Watch the skies and hear the wind blow.

Billy Hauser proved a super pupil. He stood taller than the other kids and handsomer too. Miss Wyatt found herself thinking thoughts unbecoming for a schoolmarm. He's only a child, she'd tell herself as she watched him knock the dust from the erasers.

Billy seemed torn between Miss Wyatt and ten-year-old Katherine McCleod. He'd sit at his tiny desk with his knees bent up to his chest and throw pieces of chalk at Kathy, a true sign of love if ever there was one.

One night Miss Wyatt crept into Rosa's tent.

"Miss Rosa, I need a love potion to bind my lover to me and shut out my rival."

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Rosa handed her a vial filled with an oily green liquid.

"Pour some of this in his inkwell. He'll forget about Katherine McCleod. Thirty-five cents, please."

"How did you know Kathy was my rival?"

"Her red pigtails. Men see them and want to dip them into inkwells. In a few years a Viennese physician will explain these things."

The sheriff moseyed by the school house just as the moon was rising. Miss Wyatt marked papers by lantern light. He tapped on the window. She looked up with a start which melted to disappointment.

"Say, Miss Wyatt, what if you and me went to the Founder's Day Dance?"

"No thank you, Sheriff. I just might have another gentleman calling." She turned and a cloud passed over the moon.

Billy's story came out in dribs and drabs as he gained a vocabulary. He'd been kept in a dark room which was neither hot nor cold. He was fed by "The Man," a thin figure with a domino. The Man beat him only once, for being too noisy. His only companions were two mops. When it came time to leave, The Man took off Billy's one-piece white garment and dressed him in the fancy duds. The Man blindfolded Billy and led him up long, long flights of stairs. Billy tripped, fell, and developed his limp. On the way up, The Man taught him the I-want-to-be sentence. The Man put Billy on the tracks and gave him a shove. When Billy looked around, The Man was gone.

"I still say he came in one of those airships like crashed in Aurora."

The Methodist Women's Circle made him some proper clothes months later when his shiny suit fell into disrepair. The sheriff confiscated the firearms. Nothing was said of gunslinging.

One Saturday, Billy and the other kids went to watch the buffalo hunters sell skins to the buyer from Chicago. Billy led the pack with his adult stride. He was several feet ahead when he turned down an alley. When the kids caught up they found Billy lying in the dirt bleeding profusely from the forehead. The doc came. Billy regained consciousness. "The Man" had done it. Billy'd turned into the alley, and there was the domino and the glinting dagger.

The doc bandaged Billy's head. He told the sheriff that maybe Billy should learn to shoot.

Miss Wyatt had Billy stay after school almost every day. One day Kathy said, "You stole my man. You and that witch."

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"I don't know what you mean, child."

"Well you watch out. I'm going to get thirty-five cents in my sock for Christmas and then we'll see."

Miss Wyatt went on with the lesson. Four times four is sixteen, but later in the week she sent a note home to all the parents urging them not to spoil their children during the Christmas holidays. Stocking gifts should be limited to, perhaps, an orange.

Because of his size, Billy was chosen to cut down the school's Christmas tree. He rode out to Palo Duro Canyon with Mr. Lawton, the head of the school board, to select a not-too-twisted cedar. They were busily sawing the tree when Billy said he'd have to go to the bushes. He scrambled down the tallis slope and Mr. Lawton heard a shot. Mr. Lawton ran to the prone Billy. Nothing moved but the vultures. The vultures always followed Billy.

"The Man" had struck again.

Miss Wyatt had to miss the Christmas dance. She stayed in the loft over the livery stable nursing Billy.

"The woman's a saint and a true Christian martyr."

"Don't the sheriff look sad without her."

In the early spring, the sheriff began to teach Billy to shoot. They'd ride out of town, find a flat rock to set up bottles and cans. Billy began as blind as a bat and a shaky shooter as well.

"You've got to be more calm. Be at one with your target. Take your time."

Bang.

Miss.

Bang.

"No, point the gun at the bottle. Just like pointing your finger at it. There's no need to hurry. Only the shots that connect count. Fire in your own time."

Bang. Shatter.

"You're learning."

He must really *be* Eric's boy.

A huge wall of gray black dust rose west of town. It poured toward the city. It stung and burned. Everyone took shelter. Except for Billy. Like the candle flame, this was totally new. He watched the sun become a tarnished dime. He felt the dirt in his nostrils, between his teeth, pouring into his pants. He saw it flow and splash along, burying his shiny boots. The buildings vanished. The sun vanished. It was almost night, a superimposition of many tiny dust-mote eclipses.

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"The Man" stood before him.

Billy hadn't heard him and he couldn't see him too well, but he knew the smell. If he'd lived a few years later, he might've identified ether. The ether and dust made his head swim. The Man came at him, holding a large needle in his outstretched left hand. But Billy found his time. Just as the needle touched his left forearm, Billy fired.

They dug Billy out of the dust and listened to his story. "The Man" had vanished with the storm, but lots of blood marked his passing.

Billy ran a high fever for weeks. The sheriff came to see him every day. At first the sheriff was really interested in seeing Miss Wyatt, but the kid looked so—old. The sand had cut tiny age wrinkles in his face and the fever dimmed his eyes. The kid reminded the sheriff of the sheriff's father, who'd died of pneumonia. The sheriff remembered his father's last words, "Son, swear to me you'll never wear a lawman's badge." If Billy Hauser lived, the sheriff would make him into the most notorious gunslinger the West had ever known. The two of them would ride out together. No one would be safe. And Miss Wyatt could live at the hideout. He'd even picked the cave, on the rim of Palo Duro Canyon.

Kathy brought wildflowers every day.

Billy got better. It was time to begin his training in earnest. The sheriff walked to the livery stable. Moaning and thrashing echoed from the loft. Had "The Man" attacked again? The sheriff shinnied up the ladder, only to see Billy and Miss Wyatt.

"Why, you son of a bitch!"

Billy didn't understand how anything that felt so good could be bad. Miss Wyatt tried to explain to him as he hastily dressed and put on his gunbelt. He didn't understand the crimson blush on her face either.

The sheriff stood outside the livery. He called Billy out. Billy thought he was going to target practice. Completely calm.

The sheriff filled his hand with the notched six-shooter of his gunfighter days. He stood in the corral facing the door of the livery. He would shoot Billy the second Billy stepped into the light. The sheriff's heart pounded. Rosa heard it and went out to watch.

Miss Wyatt climbed down the ladder. Stop this thing. She watched Billy approach the sunlit doorway.

Billy stepped into the light.

The sheriff fired. Too fast. The bullet sliced off a piece of the lintel. Billy drew up his gun slow-like. He found his time. He fired.

Miss Wyatt learned a lesson in emotional physics. Friendship (like gravity) may be a weak force, but it is ultimately binding. She rushed

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past Billy to kneel by the sheriff as his red life poured into the shit-strewn earth. Behind Billy in the darkness of the livery, somebody applauded. Who could applaud such a terrible act? Billy wheeled. The Man thrust an ether-soaked rag into Billy's face.

A month later: A young man in a silk-shiny sailor suit walks unsteadily along the Galveston dock. He barely makes it up the gangplank of a cotton boat. With unfocusing eyes he turns to the quartermaster and says, "I want to be a sailor like my father was."

And in a few days, The Man would once again diamond-etch another notch on his ether bottle.●

"ANGELS FLY BECAUSE THEY TAKE THEMSELVES LIGHTLY"
—G.K. Chesterton

Angels fly
because
they take themselves
lightly between the thumb
and forefinger,
and lift themselves
above the casual world.

Angels fly
because
they take themselves
lightly as flour on a board,
rising in yeasty splendor
into the bowl of the sky.

Angels fly
because they take themselves
lightly as sun
on dark water,
breaking into motes
that float along the tumbling stream.

Angels fly
because
they take themselves
lightly above
the gravity
of any situation.

Angels fly
because
they take themselves
lightly.

—Jane Yolen

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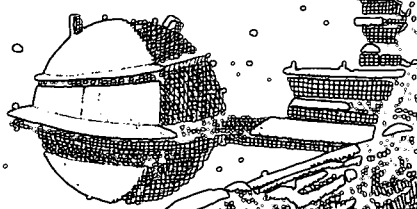
THE RETURN OF WEIRD FRANK

by Allen Steele

The extraordinarily bizarre "Return of Weird Frank" is a sequel to the author's earlier off-beat tale about "Free Beer and the William Casey Society" (February 1989). Mr. Steele's sardonic new story was inspired by an article on an awkward situation NASA astronauts aboard a space station may someday have to face.

art: Janet Aulisio



Warning: This story contains scenes which may be disturbing to some.

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This is a warning, the only one you'll get, so don't take it lightly: this is a truly bizarre and ugly story. In all probability it is a lie, since it was told to me second-hand in a seedy Florida barroom, the last place one should ever expect to hear the truth about anything; if it *isn't* a lie, then human affairs are even more depraved than you may have imagined.

If you're searching for a nice, soothing yarn which will make you sleep easier tonight, snug and secure in the knowledge that people are essentially decent and that, even in the frontier of space, there are certain codes of human behavior by which all men and women abide, then it is strongly suggested that you skip this story. This tale is a rabid dog with a mouthful of foam and an attitude.

This is the story of Weird Frank and the terrible things which were done to his stinking corpse, and if you're not ready for some unsettling stuff, it's time to go away before things get messy.

You have been warned.

By sheer coincidence, it was on a Halloween night when I first noticed the photo of Weird Frank on the wall behind the bar at Diamondback Jack's. I wasn't thinking of ghosts, zombies, or the so-called things which bump in the night. In fact, I had even forgotten that it was Halloween. It was a dull evening, and I had dropped by the roadhouse to have a couple of beers before heading home to my place in Cocoa Beach.

Diamondback Jack's is a scruffy little beer joint located on Route 3 on Merritt Island, about two miles down the highway from the south gate of Kennedy Space Center. It is very much a blue-collar kind of place, and not even a nice one at that; don't seek it out unless you know how to handle yourself in a fight with a mean drunk who has murder on his mind because you happened to bump into his cue while he was laying up a two-corner shot on the pool table. The ambiance is Late American Redneck: sticky floors, battered cheap furniture, bad lighting, and a juke box filled mainly with country/western CDs. No windows, a dirt parking lot splattered with oil, vomit, and piss, and a men's room in which you don't want to spend much time. The varnished hide of a four-foot rattler is mounted above the bar; it either came from the hide of a snake which the owner, Jack Baker, claimed to have killed while on a fishing trip in the Everglades, or from one of the regulars who bounced a check on him.

Diamondback Jack's is a hangout for space pros, the men and women at the Cape who do the hands-on dirty work of the high frontier—shuttle jocks, pad rats, cargo dips, software weenies, firing room honchos, Vacuum Suckers, itinerant beamjacks and moondogs who hang out there between off-Earth jobs—and it shows. Framed photos of space scenes are on all the walls: shuttle liftoffs, shots of the lunar base at Descartes, the big wheel of Olympus Station under construction, the assembly of the

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first SPS powersat. Behind the long oak bar where the owner, Jack Baker, holds court every night, are more pictures: vets of the final frontier, living and dead, famous and infamous. Some of the faces belong to regular customers; most, though, are legends, if only among the fraternity of pros. No one else knows their names.

I thought I was familiar with each face on the wall, but that night, for the first time, I spotted a picture which I had simply never noticed before. Jack had rearranged the bottles behind the bar, so the tall-necked vodka bottles were in a different place which no longer blocked this particular photo. I was bored, and while sitting on the bar stool and absently scanning the pictures, I happened to notice this one particular photo.

The man in the photo had dark, curly hair and a greasy handlebar mustache; he looked like the sort of person you might imagine making obscene phone calls to a Catholic convent. He was wearing a Skycorp jumpsuit with the sleeves cut off, grinning at the camera while throttling a rubber chicken in his hairy hands. Fairly unremarkable, compared to some of the other pictures on the wall, except that someone had taped a handwritten caption to the bottom of the frame.

I stood up on the rungs of my stool, leaned over the bartop, and squinted at the caption. It read:

Frank McDowell—The Greatest Corpse Who Ever Lived.

Who can ignore a line like that?

"Hey, Jack," I called out. "Who was Frank McDowell?"

Jack Baker was sitting at the opposite end of the bar, suffering through a newspaper crossword puzzle. He looked up, followed my gaze to the photograph, then sighed and closed his eyes. "Never mind," he said.

"I'm serious," I insisted. "Who was Frank McDowell, and why was he the greatest corpse who ever lived?"

Jack glared at me, then laid down his pencil and walked over to my end of the bar, pulling a fresh Budweiser out of the cooler on the way. "This one's on the house if you drop the question," he said as he placed the beer in front of me.

It was tempting, but the worst way to shake a journalist's curiosity is to attempt bribing him. "I'll pay for the beer, thanks. I just want to know. . . ."

"Yeah, right." He gave me a long, hard stare, saying nothing for a few moments. "This doesn't end up in your paper, does it?" he asked quietly.

That was a serious question, potentially endangering my good standing in the bar. In my case, being in bad standing at Diamondback Jack's possibly meant being dragged out back and having the shit kicked out of me for no good reason at all. There are a number of different people who are not welcome in the bar: top NASA officials, executives for the

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major space companies, union reps, tourists, space groupies, children . . . and journalists. *Especially* journalists. Reporters are perceived around the Cape as having screwed the space pros since the Project Mercury days. Gators, leeches, and rattlesnakes are held in higher regard on the Space Coast than the press; at least their behavior is excusable because of their nature, and none of them has ever pushed a camera or a live mike into the faces of a family who has just watched a shuttle blow up nine miles downrange from the pad. With only one exception, none were tolerated in Diamondback Jack's.

I was the exception. I was the only writer allowed on the premises, and this was because I never opened my notebook or turned on my recorder in the bar, or repeated anything that I had heard or seen in my freelance articles for the *Times*. For this reason, Jack served me, and the other regulars didn't beat me up in the parking lot on general principles.

My status was hard-won, and I was careful never to abuse the privilege. "I promise," I said solemnly. "Just tell me what. . . ."

I shrugged and pointed to the photo with the mysterious caption. Jack gave me one more look of warning—*fuck with me and I'll ram an ice-scoop down your throat*—then he raised a hand and whistled. "Hey, Marty! C'mere! Al wants to know something."

There was a heavy-set guy with long, dirty blond hair shooting pool by himself at the other side of the room. I had seen him in the bar before, but had never met him. He put down his cue, walked over and elbowed up against the bar next to me. Jack introduced us: his name was Marty—last names seldom matter in Diamondback Jack's—and he had been a beam-jack on Olympus Station back in '22 and '23, the years when SPS-3 was being built. Marty looked tough as a whore; when he reached for his beer, I noticed that he had the letters H-A-T-E tatooed across the thick knuckles of his right hand. But he was willing to talk as long as I bought the suds.

Jack put another round in front of us, then returned to his crossword puzzle. "What do you want to know?" Marty asked.

"The picture," I replied, pointing again to the photo of Frank McDowell. "What's with the caption on that picture? 'The Greatest. . . .' "

" 'The Greatest Corpse Who Ever Lived,' " Marty finished, nodding his head. "Uh-huh. I wrote that."

"What's it mean?"

Marty smiled and looked down at the scratched bartop, idly tracing his finger around the wet ring left by a bottle. "Do you know it's Halloween?"

"It is? I forgot. . . . Yeah, I guess so. Why?"

He laughed and picked up his beer. "Are you in the mood for a Halloween story?" He took a sip and peered at me over the neck of his bottle. "I mean, a true story? None of this shit about the Hook, stuff like that?"

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"Sure. Why not?"

"Right." He looked at the picture on the wall for a moment. "Okay . . . so long as you don't say I didn't warn you."

When Marty had been employed by Skycorp in 2022 as one of the high-orbit construction workers who were building the first powersats, there had been another beamjack aboard Olympus Station named Frank McDowell. It's a well-known fact that many of the men and women who worked as beamjacks aboard Skycan were deranged. Sanity was not a necessary prerequisite for working in space, at least not for the private American space companies. The big buffalo went to work in space, and only the toughest and the most crazy of the herd were hired for the obligatory one-year contracts on Olympus. Weird Frank, though, was one of the most fucked of a fucked-up crowd.

Weird Frank was a practical joker without a decent sense of humor. He was the type of person who is compelled to play pranks, but doesn't have a good handle on what is funny and what is not. Weird Frank liked to put fresh turds in people's bunks or line the crotch of their hardsuits with Ben-Gay. Weird Frank would find out that someone had a dead sister, then would tell another guy that the poor girl had a great body and he should ask about getting a date once they got back to Earth. Weird Frank, while some guy was floating next to him in the EVA ready-room, suiting up for work on the next shift, would surreptitiously drain his air supply from his life-support pack; when that person got out on tether, he would find that he only had about ten minutes of oxygen in the tank, just enough time to get into an emergency airlock. Weird Frank would borrow your water squeezebulb during a break and spit down the tube, then crack up when you put it to your mouth: *Heeeeey, Phil! I just spit in your water. . . .*

"Weird Frank was a sick kinda dude," Marty said. "I don't know why we put up with him as long as we did."

"So why did you?" I asked.

Marty swigged his beer. "He was a nice guy somehow. He got under your skin, sure, but nothing he did was much worse than any of the bullshit anyone else did up there. And there wasn't anything really malicious about what he did . . . it was just the *way* he did it. Every now and then someone would grab him by the neck and get ready to pound the fuck out of him, and his eyes would go wide and he'd put up his hands. 'Hey, man, I didn't mean it, I swear!' "

I nodded. I knew a jerk like Weird Frank, during my teenage exile to a boarding school in Tennessee. That guy, though, was too large to be pounded and his daddy was too wealthy for the school to afford to expell him, which explained how he got away with his pranks. After twenty

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years, though, I would still like to get him alone in a dark alley. . . . "Nobody ever got serious with him?"

"Not really. Frank wanted to be a pal, that's all. He just didn't know what a good joke was . . . except when he told one accidentally, then we all laughed." He shrugged. "But that wasn't very often. The guy was a freak. We were looking for some way to get him off Skycan when he got killed."

Something in my chest went cold. "Marty," I asked tentatively, "did somebody. . . ?"

He shook his head. "Uh-uh. Nothing like that. We only were trying to find a way to get his contract cancelled. What happened was an accident, believe me."

In March, 2022, a wicked series of solar flares occurred on the surface of the sun. Solar flares are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to predict. The only way astronomers can tell that they're coming is by gauging the eleven-year cycle of increased sunspot activity and watching for an increase in solar luminosity preceding a major flux . . . a dicey proposition at best, considering that these flares occur with the swift, random violence of a serial killer deciding it's time to take to the streets again.

The gamma-radiation was potentially lethal to the work crews on the powersats, since they were on EVA outside the shielded environments of Olympus Station or the construction shack, Vulcan Station. On the other hand, everyone had to play things very close. The construction schedule for SPS-3 was such that Skycorp couldn't order an indefinite stop-work just because someone thought a solar flare *might* occur soon. Crying wolf could result in several days of labor being lost for nothing, and even the beamjacks didn't want to sit around in the bunkhouse modules, wasting time for little reason. Not when their bonuses depended upon completing each stage of construction on time. So flare alerts were done at the last minute, when it was absolutely certain that serious storms were kicking up on the sun's corona and that everyone had better dive for cover. In general, there was a nine-minute leeway between the time the flares reached lethal proportions and the time their gamma-rays reached Earth orbit. When the alerts happened, beamjacks on EVA abandoned whatever they were doing, untethered from the powersat and split for Vulcan Station, *mucho prompto.*

On the day that a flare alert was called, Weird Frank was on EVA, but not on the powersat, where he could have seen everyone heading for shelter in the construction shack. He was outside Olympus Station, performing one of the routine jobs that, once each week, someone draws from the duty roster: "hole patrol," checking the outer hulls of the rim modules for micrometeorite damage and filling the little holes with "Silly

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Putty," the goop used to repair small punctures. When the alert was called, Frank McDowell apparently did not hear, nor did he respond.

"Why didn't he hear the alert?" I asked.

Marty finished his beer, belched and signaled Jack to bring us another round. "The stupid sumbitch had stuck a micro-CD in his chest unit, where you usually put talk-through tutorials for new guys. He had put in Led Zeppelin and cranked it to the max, so he couldn't hear anything coming over his comlink. When Command was trying to warn him to get inside, all he was hearing was hard rock. Drowned out everything else." He shrugged. "Can't knock his taste, though. Led Zep was classic shit for spacewalking. . . ."

"But he never got inside?"

"Oh, he finally got in. Not until the CD ended, though, or until he started feeling dizzy. They had been yelling for him to get inside for ten minutes after the storm hit us before he cycled through the hub airlock and told Dave Chang he felt sick. Then he collapsed, right there in the Docks. Chang got his suit off and called Doc Felapolous, but by the time Doc got up there, Frank was comatose. The radiation had gone right through his suit. Bone marrow, lymph glands, guts and nuts. . . ."

Marty winced and snapped his fingers. "Boom. He was a dead man before he even got to the airlock. The only good thing was that he was unconscious when he kicked off. Poor bastard died hard. It's a shitty way to go."

"Hmmm." I took another hit off my beer and gazed at the photo of Weird Frank, grinning and strangling a rubber bird. "That's it?"

Marty chuckled morosely and looked at the picture himself. "Nope. That was just the beginning. Weird Frank wasn't about to let go that easy. The fucker couldn't leave without playing another practical joke."

"But he was *dead*. . . ."

"That's what I said." Marty took another chug from his beer, oblivious to his own rhyme. "The problem was, we couldn't get rid of the body."

In the old science fiction movies, the cliché was that the dearly departed were given a burial in space. Much like the traditional burial at sea practiced by sailors, except that in the films the shroud-wrapped corpse was ejected from the spacecraft, presumably to float through the cosmos forever. Stirring music, bagpipes, grim comrades, Psalms 100 read by the captain . . . yeah, you know the bit.

The truth, however, is that nobody is ever buried in space. For one thing, the families and friends of the deceased usually want to bury them at home. For another, NASA pathologists back at the Cape perform autopsies as standard operating procedure, at least to settle life insurance requirements, not to mention making sure the space companies

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aren't overlooking government regulations. Besides, the way people die out there is still a seldom-documented aspect of space medicine, since it doesn't occur all that often. Every stiff is an education, you might say; the more you learn from one chap's demise, the more it may help to save the next guy who knocks on heaven's door.

Because people *do* get killed in space, though, there are a number of contingency plans. Black, heavy-duty plastic body bags were stowed in Skycan's infirmary; once Frank was pronounced dead, Doc Felapolous zipped his corpse into one of them. Yet it was more difficult than usual to inter Frank's body until it could be returned to Earth.

Standard practice, albeit seldom mentioned beyond the pages of the NASA manual, dictates that the body-bagged corpse should be taken outside the pressure vessel and tied to the outer hull with cables. When people had died before on Olympus Station, their bodies were lashed to the station's hub to await pickup by the next OTV to dock with Skycan. The stiffs were then taken down-orbit to Freedom Station where they were loaded into a shuttle for the last leg of their final journey to Earth.

In Frank McDowell's case, however, this couldn't be done. The solar flares which had killed him were still raging, and were likely to continue for several days. Anyone attempting an EVA to tie the body to the station hub would have suffered the same fate Weird Frank had met. To make matters worse, all OTV flights to geosynchronous orbit were halted until the storm was over, since gamma-ray bursts tended to screw their inertial guidance systems and cause them to head for the moon and points beyond. A retrieval of the corpse any time soon was out of the question, and even to load Frank's body into one of Skycan's own OTVs was inadvisable, since the hub airlock was the least shielded of the station's modules.

"So you were stuck with a dead body," I said. "What did you do with him?"

Marty belched into his fist. " 'Scuse me. Doc took the only option that was available. He had one of the big refrigerators in the galley emptied out and the racks removed, and we stored him in there."

"Oh, jeez! The cooks must have loved that."

"They weren't crazy about it, no, but Doc made sure all the food was removed so that there wasn't a chance of contamination." He absently picked at the label on his beer bottle. "It wasn't a bad idea, considering the circumstances. At least then no one had to look at him. The fridge had a temperature of 37 degrees Fahrenheit, so Frank remained . . . well, fresh."

"Fresh meat. Sure."

"Yeah, right. Anyway, he was put in an upright position and sealed in a black body bag. Doc hung a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door, so. . . ."

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I started to laugh. Marty gave me a dubious look. "If you think *that's* funny," he said, "you're gonna *love* the rest."

Death didn't occur often aboard Skycan, but when it did there was tradition to be observed, even when the deceased was a geek like Frank McDowell. His passage from the mortal coil was marked by an Irish wake in the rec room.

This is swell for scholars and saints, but by then there were already signs that Weird Frank was not going to be honored in a manner befitting scholars and saints. At dinnertime, someone had altered the chalkboard menu in the mess module to announce that tonight's entrees would include Soup du Frank, Frankloaf, and Frank-eyed peas, with Frozen Frank Pudding for dessert . . . and it didn't help that the real main course was liver. But it was not until the wake that everyone's true feelings emerged in regard to their fallen comrade.

There was plenty of beer to go around, since Skycorp had finally relaxed its in-orbit alcohol standards after the smuggling incident with the Free Beer conspiracy. For this mournful occasion, one of the weekends-only kegs was released from storage; since no one was working any EVA shifts because of the flares or were likely to do so within the next couple of days, almost everyone took the opportunity to get loaded.

During the first couple of rounds, most people were sincerely regretful about Weird Frank's death: *"Christ, man, what a way to buy the farm."* By the third round, though, many former victims of Frank's bad practical jokes were recalling their experiences *("Hey, remember the story he told about your sister?")* and the rest were expressing the opinion that it was better that Frank's number had been called instead of their own *("I was supposed to be on hole patrol tomorrow, 'dja know that?")*. By the fourth round, a few folks were quietly saying that the asshole deserved it *("Like, y'know, you get what's coming to you in this life, right?")* and by the sixth, the opinion was unanimous *("Fuck him and good riddance")*.

"That was when Frank made his first appearance," Marty said.

"Let me guess," I said. "A picture fell from the wall, or a cup mysteriously moved from one side of a table to another." I couldn't help it. Marty had promised me a Halloween story, and I had heard enough ghost stories from allegedly reliable sources to think I recognized a punchline when it was coming. Okay, here comes another bullshit yarn about the Haunted Space Station. . . .

"No, no," he replied. "I mean, *Frank* returned."

"Yeah. You looked up and saw him sitting in a chair. He was surrounded by this strange glow and. . . ."

"When nobody was looking," Marty said calmly, "Russ the Bus and

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Horny Harry had sneaked over to the mess deck, found the fridge where Doc had stashed the body, and carried Frank back to the party."

". . . come *again*?"

He smiled and took another swig from his beer. "I didn't even see it happen. I was over at the holotable watching the Lakers game when I heard some commotion behind me. I didn't pay any attention, but I had just gotten through telling somebody about the time Weird Frank had reset my suit comlink so that I was picking up Russian crosstalk when Russ tapped me on the shoulder. 'Hey, Marty, why doncha tell Frank what you thought about his shit?' I turned around to tell the Bus to get lost. . . ."

Marty grinned and shrugged. "And there was this body bag leaned up against the wall next to the hatch ladder. Frank."

"Jesus Christ," I murmured.

"No, it was Frank. . . ."

"That's pretty ill. . . ."

Marty's head cocked back and forth. "Actually, it was pretty funny at the time," he said, completely blasé about the notion. "We were all bombed, of course, and Frank wasn't high on anyone's list of best-loved dead people."

"But still. . . ."

"Hey, the party was for *him,* so what the hell? Anyway, everybody got their chance to come around and give Frank their last regards or whatever."

"That's sick!"

"Looky. The Russians put Lenin's stiff in a glass case for almost a whole century. That was a national symbol for them." Marty smiled and tipped his bottle toward me. "I mean, there's worse ways to be remembered. If anything, showing up for his own wake was the best practical joke Frank ever pulled."

I started to say that Weird Frank hadn't led the Russian communist revolution, as a practical joke or otherwise, but Marty sipped his beer and went on. "The bag was kept zipped up, because nobody wanted to really look at him, but the thought that Weird Frank had made it to his own wake . . . well, you had to be there. It was funny."

The humor was lost on Doc Felapolous when he stopped by the rec room a few minutes later to see how the wake was going. Skycan's chief physician went berserk when he discovered that the body had been stolen from the refrigerator. After chewing out everyone in sight, he picked two crewmen at random to carry Frank's body back to the galley, and Felapolous sealed the hatch with his keycard so no one else would try the same thing again.

That should have been the end of it. It wasn't.

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While Marty visited the men's room, I got Jack to bring us another round and a shot of tequila for myself; this was beginning to look like a story best taken with raw liquor. Marty continued his tale when he got back from the head.

"You couldn't keep the mess deck locked at all times because everyone had most of the keycard codes for everything else," he went on. "Even though Doc had encrypted the hatchlock, it wasn't hard for Horny Harry to figure out that, in a hurry, Doc might use the numbers 4-15-3 on the keypad . . . which spells D-O-C in alphanumeric. So it was easy for someone to get in there to steal the body from the fridge."

I nodded. There was no real need to ask why a normally sane person would resort to body-snatching for kicks. It was well known that life on Olympus Station was monotonous: sleep, eat, work, and not much else. People often compared the wild nightlife in Skycan to that of Deadhorse, Alaska. The guys who signed contracts with Skycorp to work for one or two years on the powersats didn't do so to meet girls or to visit thrilling countries. They went up to make big fast money in a gritty, dangerous job, not to conquer the universe.

Nonetheless, time tended to drag on Skycan, and bored people often do weird things to keep themselves amused. Skycan was a place where the circle jerk could easily be recognized as a team sport by the Olympics Committee. In this instance, the crew didn't even have their jobs to keep themselves occupied. The flare had forced a construction shutdown for several days; it was too dangerous to leave Olympus Station. So what do you do, after Monopoly becomes monotonous and you've watched all the old movies in the rec room several times?

Well, when there's the dead body of a practical joker no one particularly liked. . . .

"The Bus got it next, which was appropriate, since he was the one who had the idea of springing Frank from the fridge in the first place." Marty grinned and shook his head. "He was in the rec room playing poker when someone behind him slipped and fell against him with a cup of coffee. Accidentally, of course."

"Of course."

"So that meant he had to go back to his bunk in Module 28 to get a clean shirt, right? He opened his locker and . . . *boom,* Frank falls out!"

"Terrific. Amazingly humorous."

Marty snickered. "Four or five of us were waiting up on the catwalk outside the module. We thought he would scream his head off, but there was just this long silence. Then he climbs up the ladder, sticks his head through the hatch, and said, 'Very goddamn funny.' "

"Hmm. Kind of anti-climatic." I sipped my beer as a thought occurred

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to me. "By the way, shouldn't Frank have been getting a little whiffy, shall we say?"

Marty shook his head. "Naw. For one thing, we were keeping him in the body-bag. And he was in the fridge between appearances, so he was staying . . . fresh, y'know? *Rigor mortis* had set in, though, so we couldn't bend his arms or legs without breaking 'em. One of the guys in the Weird Frank Fan Club. . . ."

"The *what?*"

"That's what we started calling ourselves. The Bus, Harry, myself, a few other guys. Anyway, one of us, Gene, had been an intern with an Army medic unit in Nicaragua before he signed up with Skycorp, so he knew something about the care and feeding of corpses. As long as Frank was kept on ice between his guest appearances and they were kept pretty brief, we didn't have to worry much about decomposure."

Marty took another hit from his beer. "In any case, the stunt with Russ's locker had been a little unsatisfactory, so we had to come up with something better. Something Frank would have appreciated. After thinking about it for a while, we came up with it. For his next mission, though, Frank had to come out of the bag."

Later that same day, the fan club raided the fridge again and smuggled Frank to the data processing center in Module Six. Lonnie, the data processing chief, had often complained about the daily updates he had to make to Skycorp's Orbital Operations Center in Huntsville. The verbal status reports sometimes took more than a half-hour and were boring reiterations of everything which was already on the data downlink, and Lonnie was never certain if he was being heard by a human or just another AI mainframe. That afternoon, with Lonnie's blessing, the Weird Frank Fan Club put the system to a test; they unzipped Weird Frank from his body bag, propped him in a seat facing the camera, and while Lonnie crouched below the camera with a mike and hard-copy of his update, they called Huntsville SOOC.

"And y'know what?" Marty asked. "Nobody down there *noticed.* They had a dead man on their screens for twenty fucking minutes and no one in Huntsville even mentioned that his lips didn't move or his eyes were shut. Lonnie had a hard time keeping from cracking up. As for us. . . ." He shrugged. "Well, it just confirmed that the front office people were even more dead from the neck up than Frank. But it wasn't much fun."

"So?" It was all beginning to sound just a bit juvenile. "What were you expecting?"

Marty looked at me askance. "When you were a kid, didn't you ever put a rubber rat in your mother's bed just to watch her scream? Something like that. We wanted to see someone lose their shit, but good.

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I mean, hauling a dead person around ain't fun unless someone pays attention."

"I get what you mean." I knew the general idea, although the most I had ever done with it was sending a roadkilled squirrel to an editor who had stiffed me on a check. I played with my empty bottle, holding the narrow neck between my thumb and forefinger and rolling the wide bottom back and forth across the bartop. "Did you ever. . . ?"

"Uh-huh. But by then, we had taken the joke a little too far."

Weird Frank fell out of two more lockers and made another visit to the rec room, but the joke was quickly becoming stale. Then somebody—Marty would not tell me who, but the disturbed twinkle in his eyes gave me a strong hint—came up with the ultimate gag.

"The Sex Monster was a beamjack who had been up there for seven months," Marty explained, "and had already frightened half the guys in the station. She was the horniest woman in Skycan. . . ."

"That should have made her popular," I said drily. It was no secret that most men who worked on the station went through involuntary celibacy . . . blueballs is the operative term. Skycan was a small, closed environment, and the company frowned on sexual congress in space ("insurance problems" was the catch-all phrase, as it was for almost everything else which was fun). So if a male got attracted to any given female among the crew, most of the ladies were either happily married or formally engaged to some dork on the ground. And, even if a guy got lucky by finding a good woman who didn't care about her fiancé in Great Falls tonight and was ready for a little sleazy sex, there was damn little privacy for making whoopie. Unless, of course, you didn't mind being interrupted by the comments of half a dozen spectators standing right outside your bunk, many of whom had placed bets upon who would achieve orgasm first.

But the Sex Monster was a different case altogether; she was the subject of nobody's wet dream. She was six-four, weighed close to two hundred pounds, and had arms and legs like a gold-medal Iron Man Triathalon runner; those who had seen her in the buff said that she resembled a sumo wrestler. This was a woman who practiced sex as a form of unarmed combat, a bull-nympho who could probably take on the entire starting lineup of the San Francisco 49ers and leave them in traction until the Superbowl. The Marquis de Sade would have hidden in a closet.

The Sex Monster had a temper, her sex drive was insatiable, and the combination spelled terror for every man in Olympus Station. A dozen guys would be in the rec room watching TV when a pair of heavy boots

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would come clomping down the ladder and a deep, not-at-all feminine voice would howl. . . .

"Who wants to *fuck*?"

And all the men would hold their breaths and stand still like rabbits. . . .

"I *said,* who wants to *FUCK?"*

Then the entire room would be squirming uncomfortably, cowering against the bulkheads and faking chest-colds, until she had selected today's lover and dragged him, whimpering pitifully, up the ladder back to her lair in Module 34, a bunkhouse which all the other women who had shared had abandoned rather than witness any more of her depravity. God forgive the putz who couldn't get it up for her.

"But Frank didn't have that problem," Marty said with an evil giggle.

The Fan Club noticed that Weird Frank's corpse had undergone a strange, morbidly-funny change. In the cold confines of the refrigerator, propped up in a vertical position, all the blood in his body had gradually drained down to the lower half of his body, a phenomenon not unknown to morticians. This had produced for Frank a formidable erection that would have put a porn-movie star to shame, a permanent hard-on which simply could not go limp. The stiff was stiff, one could say.

The opportunity was too good to miss.

By now I was shaking my head. "Oh, no," I was saying. "Don't tell me you did. Please don't tell me you did. *Please* don't tell me you . . ."

"Yes," he said softly, "we did." Marty took a long draw from his beer. "When the Monster returned to her bunk after her shift, there was a man waiting for her in bed. And, needless to say, the lights were out. . . ."

"God, that's *vile. . . !"*

"We were waiting outside the hatch, but we couldn't hear anything for the first couple of minutes, until she noticed that he was rather cold and unresponsive. . . ." The leer on his face was hideous. "Mainly cold."

"You're *evil!"* I yelled. I started to grab the neck of my beer bottle, preparing to bash in his skull. Baker, who had been listening from the other end of the bar, made a grab for the Louisville Slugger he kept under the cash register for salesmen and lawyers; judging from the look on his face, though, he might have been getting ready to help me.

Marty went on relentlessly, oblivious to both of us. "Then, all of a sudden, there was a screech you could hear halfway across the station. Pure fucking terror. . . ."

"I can't blame her. . . ."

"Then we heard her scream again. This time, she was nothing except pissed off, because she had been in the rec room during Frank's wake. *'Goddammitalltohell,'* she yelled, *'I'm sick of this fucking shit!'* We

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jumped back from the hatch and suddenly the Monster comes up the ladder, hauling Frank behind her, wrapped in a blanket."

Wearing only a bathrobe, and with a homicidal look in her eyes which made even the Bus scurry away, the Sex Monster hauled the body up the ladder. As everyone dove for cover behind each other, she began dragging the swathed corpse down the upward-curving central passageway. It was understandable why she was less than respectful to the condition of the body, but it didn't make the situation less macabre.

"She headed straight for Module 30, the waste reclamation center, screaming obscenities all the way," Marty continued. "We didn't know what she was planning until she opened the hatch and started to shove Frank down, and even then there was nothing we could do about it. I mean, she had completely *flipped. . . !*"

The station's main airlocks were in the hub, but there was a small, exit-only airlock in Module 30 which was used by the life-support engineers for the disposal of solid waste which could not be recycled. Before anyone could stop the Sex Monster, she had shoved Weird Frank into the tube, slammed the hatch closed, and hit the jettison button.

She didn't even bother to decompress the airlock first; Frank went in one end of the tube and was shot out of Skycan through the other. There was no reading from the Book of Psalms.

"And that was the last you saw of Weird Frank," I finished.

Marty shook his head; the grin had disappeared from his face. "No," he said slowly, "it was not."

The main reason why dead astronauts are not given burials in space has to do with physics: if they were simply let loose from an airlock, without sufficient forward motion, their bodies would establish their own miniature orbits around the spacecraft or station. But, in the case of the Sex Monster ejecting Weird Frank from Skycan, two different things happened. She had not bothered to decompress the airlock, thus the sudden opening of the outer hatch blew the corpse completely clear of the station.

Frank's remains went into their own eccentric orbit, all right . . . but in a geosynchronous orbit around Earth, not around either Skycan or Vulcan Station.

"Once we realized what had happened," Marty continued, "someone ran up to the command center and explained things to one of the traffic control officers. We thought that, if we could pinpoint Frank's location on radar, we could send out a work pod to retrieve him from space."

He leveled his hands in a shrug. "But the TRAFCO couldn't find anything on his screen, so we figured that, just maybe, the station's rotation had been such that Module 30 was pointed toward Earth and. . . ."

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"Frank's trajectory would take him to burn-up in the upper atmosphere," I finished. "Okay. Reasonable assumption. What did you do about it?"

Marty shrugged and picked up the fresh beer which Jack Baker had placed in front of him. "Nothing, really. What was done, was done. Doc Felapolous was pissed off and we lost a week's salary in company fines when Skycorp got the story out of him, but Doc explained to Frank's relatives that we had opted for burial in space. . . ."

"They didn't know better?"

"Naw, they didn't know better . . . and how would you explain it if you wanted to tell the truth? Anyway, we figured that was the end of it. The next day the flares died and the alert ended, so we all went back to work on SPS-3."

And that still was not the end of the grim affair.

Two days later, though, during the second work-shift on the powersat, a beamjack who was welding trusses at the far end of the platform was informed by the foreman in Vulcan's command center that a mass of small objects was headed in his direction. This was unusual, but not unlikely; space junk tended to float through the construction zone from time to time. It only meant that anyone on EVA had to take cover until it passed, then a robot sweeper would be sent out to gather up the garbage before it posed a hazard to anyone else.

"I was on tether on the other side of the powersat," Marty explained, "and even though I was hearing everything over the crosstalk channel, I wasn't really paying much attention. So here was this poor slob, who had taken cover within the trusswork and was waiting for what he thought was old third-stage rocket debris or some lost bolts from the Russian powersat, something like that, to pass by . . . and suddenly we all hear him gagging and screaming, 'Frank! Frank! *Frank. . . !*'"

I shook my head. "I don't understand. If they were small objects, then how could they be Frank's body. . . ?"

Then it hit me, and the last few beers I had enjoyed began to roil in my stomach. It had been Weird Frank's body, all right . . . but it had no longer been in one piece.

Take a dead body. Allow it to attain *rigor mortis,* put it in a refrigerator and freeze it until it becomes stiff, then brutally eject it from an airlock at a velocity akin to that of a Kansas tornado at ground-zero... . .

And take a guess what happens.

If you haven't had even the urge to barf by now, you're qualified to be either an undertaker or a politician. Or a journalist.

"Yeah," Marty said, and sniggered. "Funny as hell, ain't it?"

Marty told the last bit as he polished off his beer and made ready to

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drive home. A sweeper had collected the remains of the corpse in its net, then the guidance system was reconfigured to take it for a long trajectory through the inner solar system to the sun itself. Nobody on Skycan wanted to be the one who removed the net from the robot's maw . . . and, considering all the terrible things which had already been done to Weird Frank, it was fitting that his final fate should be incineration by that which had killed him, the sun itself.

"And that was the end of it, I guess." I played with an empty beer bottle as the former beamjack shrugged into his denim jacket. I couldn't look at his face.

"That's it." He pulled on his jacket with its Harley Davidson eagle-patch on the back and the breast-pocket button which read *Fuck Everyone,* swigged down the last of his Budweiser, and stared back at me for a moment. "You must think I'm a real asshole, don't you?" he asked abruptly.

I imagined his right hand, with the word HATE tattooed across the knuckles, curling into a fist and slamming into my jaw. I didn't give a shit. "Yeah," I said, looking up to squarely meet his gaze, "I think you're a real asshole."

His right hand didn't become a fist; it leisurely went into the front pocket of his jeans, covering the four-letter word on the knuckles. "Then you haven't gotten the point of that whole story," he said, "or why I wrote those words under the picture."

"No, man, I don't get it."

"Looky here, then. Frank was a guy without a good sense of humor who tried to make people laugh. He could have sat buck-nekkid in the rec room and wacked off with a copy of *TV Guide* and nobody would have laughed at him. . . ."

"So? What's the point?"

Marty grinned. "And then he died, and by doing so he became *funny.* Maybe you can say that death improved his character. Maybe it made him a better man."

Hands in his pockets, he rocked drunkenly back on his feet. "I dunno. But nobody would have remembered him if his body hadn't fallen out of lockers or went to his own wake or any of that shit. And I'm glad I helped him realize his potential, I really am. I'm fucking *proud* of it."

He shrugged again. "If that makes me an asshole, great. But you're an even bigger asshole if you don't get the joke. Sometimes death or a good joke are the only things which give a man's life some kinda meaning, and that's why Weird Frank was the greatest corpse who ever lived. Y'know what I mean?"

He didn't wait for my answer, even if he had expected one from me. Marty gave my arm a slap and walked past me to the door. A minute

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later I heard the rev of his Harley's engine; then the bike roared out of the parking lot and down the highway, mowing down Route 3, headed for Route A1A and Cocoa Beach. An ugly brute on the road, looking for another loser's corpse to transform into a better man. . . .

Jack Baker put down his pencil and crossword puzzle, fetched me another beer, and silently placed it in front of me on the bar. I barely noticed; I was looking at the picture on the wall of Weird Frank, strangling that stupid rubber chicken. After awhile, I began to laugh to myself, a chuckle which sounded like a death-rattle from beyond the grave.

It's a *joke,* son. Don't you get it?●

The madcap **Howard Waldrop** has been called "the resident Weird Mind of his generation" and referred to as someone who can "write like a honkytonk angel," and he proves both statements in spades with the new novelette we're bringing to you next month, our Mid-December cover story, "Fin de Cyclé." In this one, Waldrop takes us along for a wild romp through a bizarre nineteenth century Paris that never was (but *could* have been) with one of the strangest and most eclectic casts of characters ever assembled, including *Marcel Proust, Pablo Picasso, Alfred Jarry, Rousseau, Emile* Zola, and Georges Méliès . . . all of them launched on a fast-paced adventure featuring steam stilts, Bicycle Infantry, the Dreyfus Affair, racism, dangerous drugs, a *very* strange motion picture, and a thrilling duel on high-wheeled bicycles fought up and down the spiral stairs of the Eiffel Tower itself. If you like your fiction fresh, funny, and madly inventive, then for goodness sakes don't miss *this* one!

ALSO IN MID-DECEMBER: Nebula and Hugo-winner **Connie Willis** wryly examines some modern-day trends that may remind you of certain uneasy developments "In the Late Cretaceous"; **Isaac Asimov,** the Good Doctor himself, returns with the latest George and Azazel story, "It's A Job"; *IAsfm*'s most prolific poet, **Robert Frazier,** changes hats to serve up a hallucinatoral vivid journey into the nightmarish Heart of Darkness of a disturbing high-tech future, in "Cruising Through Blueland"; **Gregory Frost** details the very funny trip into the unexpected that awaits an ordinary couple when they decide to explore "The Hole in Edgar's Hillside"; new writer **Peni R. Griffin** takes us along to a sprightly and somewhat odd party that takes place "One Night in Mulberry Court"; **Richard Paul Russo** comes up with some sobering conclusions when he pauses to "Celebrate the Bullet"; and new writer **Michaelene Pendleton,** making her *IAsfm* debut, plunges us into a deadly future war for a suspensful story of "Professionals" at work. Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our Mid-December issue on sale on your newsstands on November 12, 1991.

NEXT ISSUE

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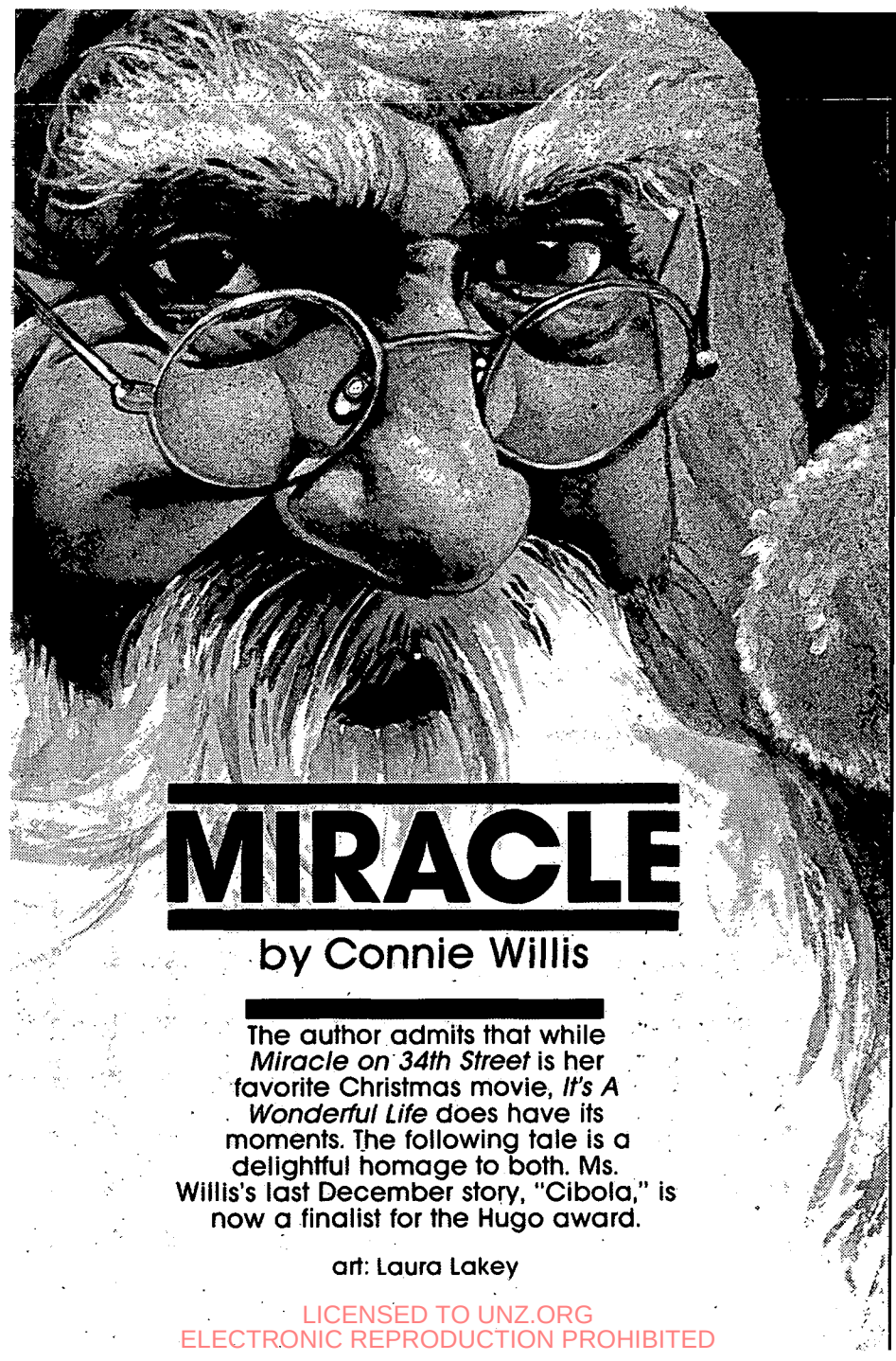

MIRACLE

by Connie Willis

The author admits that while *Miracle on 34th Street* is her favorite Christmas movie, *It's A Wonderful Life* does have its moments. The following tale is a delightful homage to both. Ms. Willis's last December story, "Cibola," is now a finalist for the Hugo award.

art: Laura Lakey

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There was a Christmas tree in the lobby when Lauren got to work, and the receptionist was sitting with her chin in her hand, watching the security monitor. Lauren set her shopping bag down and looked curiously at the screen. On it, Jimmy Stewart was dancing the Charleston with Donna Reed.

"The Personnel Morale Special Committee had cable piped in for Christmas," the receptionist explained, handing Lauren her messages. "I love *It's a Wonderful Life,* don't you?"

Lauren stuck her messages in the top of her shopping bag and went up to her department. Red and green crepe paper hung in streamers from the ceiling, and there was a big red crepe paper bow tied around Lauren's desk.

"The Personnel Morale Special Committee did it," Cassie said, coming over with the catalogue she'd been reading. "They're decorating the whole building, and they want us and Document Control to go caroling this afternoon. Don't you think PMS is getting out of hand with this Christmas spirit thing? I mean, who wants to spend Christmas Eve at an office party?"

"I do," Lauren said. She set her shopping bag down on the desk, sat down, and began taking off her boots.

"Can I borrow your stapler?" Cassie asked. "I've lost mine again. I'm ordering my mother the Water of the Month, and I need to staple my check to the order form."

"The water of the month?" Lauren said, opening her desk drawer and taking out her stapler.

"You know, they send you bottles of a different one every month. Perrier, Evian, Calistoga." She peered in Lauren's shopping bag. "Do you have Christmas presents in there? I hate people who have their shopping done four weeks before Christmas."

"It's four *days* till Christmas," Lauren said, "and I don't have it all done. I still don't have anything for my sister. But I've got all my friends, including you, done." She reached in the shopping bag and pulled out her pumps. "*And* I found a dress for the office party."

"Did you buy it?"

"No." She put on one of her shoes. "I'm going to try it on during my lunch hour."

"If it's still there," Cassie said gloomily. "I had this echidna toothpick holder all picked out for my brother, and when I went back to buy it, they were all gone."

"I asked them to hold the dress for me," Lauren said. She put on her other shoe. "It's gorgeous. Black off-the-shoulder. Sequined."

"Still trying to get Scott Buckley to notice you, huh? I don't do things like that any more. Nineties women don't use sexist tricks to attract men. Besides, I decided he was too cute to ever notice somebody like me." She sat down on the edge of Lauren's desk and started leafing through the catalogue. "Here's something your sister might like. The Vegetable of the Month. February's okra."

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"She lives in southern California," Lauren said, shoving her boots under the desk.

"Oh. How about the Sunscreen of the Month?"

"No," Lauren said. "She's into New Age stuff. Channeling and stuff. Last year she sent me a crystal pyramid mate selector for Christmas."

"The Eastern philosophy of the month," Cassie said. "Zen, sufism, tai chi—"

"I'd like to get her something she'd really like," Lauren mused. "I always have a terrible time figuring out what to get people for Christmas. So this year, I decided things were going to be different. I wasn't going to be tearing around the mall the day before Christmas, buying things no one would want and wondering what on earth I was going to wear to the office party. I started doing my shopping in September, I wrapped my presents as soon as I bought them, I have all my Christmas cards done and ready to mail—"

"You're disgusting," Cassie said. "Oh, here, I almost forgot." She pulled a folded slip of paper out of her catalogue and handed it to Lauren. "It's your name for the Secret Santa gift exchange. PMS says you're supposed to bring your present for it by Friday so it won't interfere with the presents Santa Claus hands out at the office party."

Lauren unfolded the paper, and Cassie leaned over to read it. "Who'd you get? Wait, don't tell me. Scott Buckley."

"No. Fred Hatch. And I know just what to get him."

"Fred? The fat guy in Documentation? What is it, the Diet of the Month?"

"This is supposed to be the season of love and charity, not the season when you make mean remarks about someone just because he's overweight," Lauren said sternly. "I'm going to get him a videotape of *Miracle on 34th Street*."

Cassie looked uncomprehending.

"It's Fred's favorite movie. We had a wonderful talk about it at the office party last year."

"I never heard of it."

"It's about Macy's Santa Claus. He starts telling people they can get their kids' toys cheaper at Gimbel's, and then the store psychiatrist decides he's crazy—"

"Why don't you get him *It's a Wonderful Life?* That's *my* favorite Christmas movie."

"Yours and everybody else's. I think Fred and I are the only two people in the world who like *Miracle on 34th Street* better. See, Edmund Gwenn, he's Santa Claus, gets committed to Bellevue because he thinks he's Santa Claus, and since there isn't any Santa Claus, he has to be crazy, but he *is* Santa Claus, and Fred Gailey, that's John Payne, he's a lawyer in the movie, he decides to have a court hearing to prove it, and—"

"I watch *It's a Wonderful Life* every Christmas. I love the part where Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed fall into the swimming pool," Cassie said. "What happened to the stapler?"

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* * *

They had the dress and it fit, but there was an enormous jam-up at the cash register, and then they couldn't find a hanging bag for it.

"Just put it in a shopping bag," Lauren said, looking anxiously at her watch.

"It'll wrinkle," the clerk said ominously and continued to search for a hanging bag. By the time Lauren convinced her a shopping bag would work, it was already twelve-fifteen. She had hoped she'd have time to look for a present for her sister, but there wasn't going to be time. She still had to run the dress home and mail the Christmas cards.

I can pick up Fred's video, she thought, fighting her way onto the escalator. That wouldn't take much time since she knew what she wanted, and maybe they'd have something with Shirley Maclaine in it she could get her sister. Ten minutes to buy the video, she thought, tops.

It took her nearly half an hour. There was only one copy, which the clerk couldn't find.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather have *It's a Wonderful Life*?" she asked Lauren. "It's my favorite movie."

"I want *Miracle on 34th Street*," Lauren said patiently. "With Edmund Gwenn and Natalie Wood."

The clerk picked up a copy of *It's a Wonderful Life* off a huge display. "See, Jimmy Stewart's in trouble and he wishes he'd never been born, and this angel grants him his wish—"

"I know," Lauren said. "I don't care. I want *Miracle on 34th Street*."

"Okay!" the clerk said, and wandered off to look for it, muttering, "Some people don't have any Christmas spirit."

She finally found it, in the M's of all places, and then insisted on giftwrapping it.

By the time Lauren made it back to her apartment, it was a quarter to one. She would have to forget lunch and mailing the Christmas cards, but she could at least take them with her, buy the stamps, and put the stamps on at work.

She took the video out of the shopping bag and set it on the coffee table next to her purse, picked up the bag and started for the bedroom.

Someone knocked on the door.

"I don't have time for this," she muttered, and opened the door, still holding the shopping bag.

It was a young man wearing a "Save the Whales" T-shirt and khaki pants. He had shoulder-length blond hair and a vague expression that made her think of Southern California.

"Yes? What is it?" she asked.

"I'm here to give you a Christmas present," he said.

"Thank you, I'm not interested in whatever you're selling," she said, and shut the door.

He knocked again immediately. "I'm not selling anything," he said through the door. "Really."

I don't have *time* for this, she thought, but she opened the door again.

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"I'm not a salesguy," he said. "Have you ever heard of the Maharishi Ram Dras?"

A religious nut.

"I don't have time to talk to you." She started to say, "I'm late for work," and then remembered you weren't supposed to tell strangers your apartment was going to be empty. "I'm very busy," she said and shut the door, more firmly this time.

The knocking commenced again, but she ignored it. She started into the bedroom with the shopping bag, came back and pushed the deadbolt across and put the chain on, and then went in to hang up her dress. By the time she'd extricated it from the tissue paper and found a hanger, the knocking had stopped. She hung up the dress, which looked just as deadly now that she had it home, and went back in the living room.

The young man was sitting on the couch, messing with her TV remote. "So, what do you want for Christmas? A yacht? A pony?" He punched buttons on the remote, frowning. "A new TV?"

"How did you get in here?" Lauren said squeakily. She looked at the door. The deadbolt and chain were both still on.

"I'm a spirit," he said, putting the remote down. The TV suddenly blared on. "The Spirit of Christmas Present."

"Oh," Lauren said, edging toward the phone. "Like in *A Christmas Carol.*"

"No," he said, flipping through the channels. She looked at the remote. It was still on the coffee table. "Not Christmas Present. Christmas *Present.* You *know,* Barbie dolls, ugly ties, cheese logs, the stuff people give you for Christmas."

"Oh, Christmas *Present.* I see," Lauren said, carefully picking up the phone.

"People *always* get me confused with him, which is really insulting. I mean, the guy obviously has a really high cholesterol level. Anyway, I'm the Spirit of Christmas Present, and your sister sent me to—"

Lauren had dialed nine one. She stopped, her finger poised over the second one. "My sister?"

"Yeah," he said, staring at the TV. Jimmy Stewart was sitting in the guard's room wrapped in a blanket. "Oh, wow! *It's A Wonderful Life.*"

My sister sent you, Lauren thought. It explained everything. He was not a Moonie or a serial killer. He was this year's version of the crystal pyramid mate selector. "How do you know my sister?"

"She channeled me," he said, leaning back against the sofa. "The Maharishi Ram Dras was instructing her in trance-meditation, and she accidentally channeled my spirit out of the astral plane." He pointed at the screen. "I love this part where the angel is trying to convince Jimmy Stewart he's dead."

"I'm not dead, am I?"

"No. I'm not an angel. I'm a spirit. The Spirit of Christmas Present. You can call me Chris for short. Your sister sent me to give you what

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you really want for Christmas. You know, your heart's desire. So what is it?"

For my sister not to send me any more presents, she thought. "Look, I'm really in a hurry right now. Why don't you come back tomorrow and we can talk about it then?"

"I hope it's not a fur coat," he said as if he hadn't heard her. "I'm opposed to the killing of endangered species." He picked up Fred's present. "What's this?"

"It's a videotape of *Miracle on 34th Street*. I really have to go."

"Who's it for?"

"Fred Hatch. I'm his Secret Santa."

"Fred Hatch." He turned the package over. "You had it gift-wrapped at the store, didn't you?"

"Yes. If we could just talk about this later—"

"This is a great part, too," he said, leaning forward to watch the TV. The angel was explaining to Jimmy Stewart how he hadn't gotten his wings yet.

"I *have* to go. I'm on my lunch hour, and I need to mail my Christmas cards, and I have to get back to work—" She glanced at her watch, "—oh my God, fifteen minutes ago."

He put down the package and stood up. "Gift-wrapped presents," he said, making a "tsk"-ing noise, "Everybody rushing around spending money, rushing to parties, never stopping to have some eggnog or watch a movie. Christmas is an endangered species." He looked longingly back at the screen, where the angel was trying to convince Jimmy Stewart he'd never been alive, and then wandered into the kitchen. "You got any Evian water?"

"No," Lauren said desperately. She hurried after him. "Look, I really have to get to work."

He had stopped at the kitchen table and was holding one of the Christmas cards. "Computer-addressed," he said reprovingly. He tore it open.

"Don't—" Lauren said.

"Printed Christmas cards," he said. "No letter, no quick note, not even a handwritten signature. That's exactly what I'm talking about. An endangered species."

"I didn't have time," Lauren said defensively. "And I don't have time to discuss this or anything else with you. I have to get to work."

"No time to write a few words on a card, no time to think about what you want for Christmas." He slid the card back into the envelope. "Not even on recycled paper," he said sadly. "Do you know how many trees are chopped down every year to send Christmas cards?"

"I am *late* for—" Lauren said, and he wasn't there anymore.

He didn't vanish like in the movies, or fade out slowly. He simply wasn't there.

"—work," Lauren said. She went and looked in the living room. The TV was still on, but he wasn't there, or in the bedroom. She went in the bathroom and pulled the shower curtain back, but he wasn't there either.

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"It was an hallucination," she said out loud, "brought on by stress." She looked at her watch, hoping it had been part of the hallucination, but it still read one-fifteen. "I will figure this out later," she said. "I *have* to get back to work."

She went back in the living room. The TV was off. She went into the kitchen. He wasn't there. Neither were her Christmas cards, exactly.

"You! Spirit!" she shouted. "You come back here this minute!"

"You're late," Cassie said, filling out a catalogue form. "You will not believe who was just here. Scott Buckley. God, he is so cute." She looked up. "What happened?" she said. "Didn't they hold the dress?"

"Do you know anything about magic?" Lauren said.

"What *happened?*"

"My sister sent me her Christmas present," Lauren said grimly. "I need to talk to someone who knows something about magic."

"Fat . . . I mean Fred Hatch is a magician. What did your sister send you?"

Lauren started down the hall to Documentation at a half-run.

"I told Scott you'd be back any minute," Cassie said. "He said he wanted to talk to you."

Lauren opened the door to Documentation and started looking over partitions into the maze of cubicles. They were all empty.

"Anybody here?" Lauren called. "Hello?"

A middle-aged woman emerged from the maze, carrying five rolls of wrapping paper and a large pair of scissors. "You don't have any Scotch tape, do you?" she asked Lauren.

"Do you know where Fred Hatch is?" Lauren asked.

The woman pointed toward the interior of the maze with a roll of reindeer-covered paper. "Over there. Doesn't *anyone* have any tape? I'm going to have to staple my Christmas presents."

Lauren worked her way toward where the woman had pointed, looking over partitions as she went. Fred was in the center one, leaning back in a chair, his hands folded over his ample stomach, staring at a screen covered with yellow numbers.

"Excuse me," Lauren said, and Fred immediately sat forward and stood up.

"I need to talk to you," she said. "Is there somewhere we can talk privately?"

"Right here," Fred said. "My assistant's on the 800 line in my office placing a catalogue order, and everyone else is next door in Graphic Design at a Tupperware party." He pushed a key, and the computer screen went blank. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Cassie said you're a magician," she said.

He looked embarrassed. "Not really. The PMS Committee put me in charge of the magic show for the office party last year, and I came up with an act. This year, luckily, they assigned me to play Santa Claus."

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He smiled and patted his stomach. "I'm the right shape for the part, and I don't have to worry about the tricks not working."

"Oh, dear," Lauren said. "I hoped . . . do you know any magicians?"

"The guy at the novelty shop," he said, looking worried. "What's the matter? Did PMS assign you the magic show this year?"

"No." She sat down on the edge of his desk. "My sister is into New Age stuff, and she sent me this spirit—"

"Spirit," he said. "A ghost, you mean?"

"No. A person. I mean he looks like a person. He says he's the Spirit of Christmas Present, as in Gift, not Here and Now."

"And you're sure he's not a person? I mean, tricks can sometimes really look like magic."

"There's a Christmas tree in my kitchen," she said.

"Christmas tree?" he said warily.

"Yes. The spirit was upset because my Christmas cards weren't on recycled paper, he asked me if I knew how many trees were chopped down to send Christmas cards, then he disappeared, and when I went back in the kitchen there was this Christmas tree in my kitchen."

"And there's no way he could have gotten into your apartment earlier and put it there?"

"It's *growing* out of the floor. Besides, it wasn't there when we were in the kitchen five minutes before. See, he was watching *It's A Wonderful Life* on TV, which, by the way, he turned on without using the remote, and he asked me if I had any Evian water, and he went in the kitchen and . . . this is ridiculous. You have to think I'm crazy. *I* think I'm crazy just listening to myself tell this ridiculous story. Evian water!" She folded her arms. "People have a lot of nervous breakdowns around Christmas time. Do you think I could be having one?"

The woman with the wrapping paper rolls peered over the cubicle wall. "Have you got a tape dispenser?"

Fred shook his head.

"How about a stapler?"

Fred handed her his stapler, and she left.

"Well," Lauren said when she was sure the woman was gone, "do you think I'm having a nervous breakdown?"

"That depends," he said.

"On what?"

"On whether there's really a tree growing out of your kitchen floor. You said he got angry because your Christmas cards weren't on recycled paper. Do you think he's dangerous?"

"I don't know. He says he's here to give me whatever I want for Christmas. Except a fur coat. He's opposed to the killing of endangered species."

"A spirit who's an animal rights activist!" Fred said delightedly. "Where did your sister get him from?"

"The astral plane," Lauren said. "She was trance-channeling or something. I don't care where he came from. I just want to get rid of him before he decides my Christmas presents aren't recyclable, too."

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"Okay," he said, hitting a key on the computer. The screen lit up. "The first thing we need to do is find out what he is and how he got here. I want you to call your sister. Maybe she knows some New Age spell for getting rid of the spirit." He began to type rapidly. "I'll get on the networks and see if I can find someone who knows something about magic."

He swiveled around to face her. "You're sure you want to get rid of him?"

"I have a *tree* growing out of my kitchen floor!"

"But what if he's telling the truth? What if he really can get you what you want for Christmas?"

"What I *wanted* was to mail my Christmas cards, which are now shedding needles on the kitchen tile. Who knows what he'll do next?"

"Yeah," he said. "Listen, whether he's dangerous or not, I think I should go home with you after work, in case he shows up again, but I've got a PMS meeting for the office party—"

"That's okay. He's an animal rights activist. He's not dangerous."

"That doesn't necessarily follow," Fred said. "I'll come over as soon as my meeting's over, and meanwhile I'll check the networks. Okay?"

"Okay," she said. She started out of the cubicle and then stopped. "I really appreciate your believing me, or at least not saying you don't believe me."

He smiled at her. "I don't have any choice. You're the only other person in the world who likes *Miracle on 34th Street* better than *It's a Wonderful Life*. And Fred Gailey believed Macy's Santa Claus was really Santa Claus, didn't he?"

"Yeah," she said. "I don't think this guy is Santa Claus. He was wearing Birkenstocks."

"I'll meet you at your front door," he said. He sat down at the computer and began typing.

Lauren went through the maze of cubicles and into the hall.

"*There* you are!" Scott said. "I've been looking for you all over." He smiled meltingly. "I'm in charge of buying gifts for the office party, and I need your help."

"My help?"

"Yeah. Picking them out. I hoped maybe I could talk you into going shopping with me after work tonight."

"Tonight?" she said. "I can't. I've got—" A Christmas tree growing in my kitchen. "Could we do it tomorrow after work?"

He shook his head. "I've got a date. What about later on tonight? The stores are open till nine. It shouldn't take more than a couple of hours to do the shopping, and then we could go have a late supper somewhere. What say I pick you up at your apartment at six-thirty?"

And have the spirit lying on the couch, drinking Evian water and watching TV? "I can't," she said regretfully.

Even his frown was cute. "Oh, well," he said, and shrugged. "Too bad. I guess I'll have to get somebody else." He gave her another adorable smile and went off down the hall to ask somebody else.

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I hate you, Spirit of Christmas Present, Lauren thought, standing there watching his handsome back recede. You'd better not be there when I get home.

A woman came down the hall, carrying a basket of candy canes. "Compliments of the Personnel Morale Special Committee," she said, offering one to Lauren. "You look like you could use a little Christmas spirit."

"No, thanks, I've already got one," Lauren said.

The door to her apartment was locked, which didn't mean much since the chain and the deadbolt had both been on when he got in before. But he wasn't in the living room, and the TV was off.

He had been there, though. There was an empty Evian water bottle on the coffee table. She picked it up and took it into the kitchen. The tree was still there, too. She pushed one of the branches aside so she could get to the wastebasket and throw the bottle away.

"Don't you know plastic bottles are nonbiodegradable?" the Spirit said. He was standing on the other side of the tree, hanging things on the branches. He was dressed in khaki shorts and a "Save the Rain Forest" T-shirt, and had a red bandanna tied around his head. "You should recycle your bottles."

"It's your bottle," Lauren said. "What are you doing here, Spirit?"

"Chris," he corrected her. "These are organic ornaments," he said. He held one of the brown things out to her. "Handmade by the Yanomamo Indians. Each one is made of natural by-products found in the Brazilian rain forest." He hung the brown thing on the tree. "Have you decided what you want for Christmas?"

"Yes," she said. "I want you to go away."

He looked surprised. "I can't do that. Not until I give you your heart's desire."

"That is my heart's desire. I want you to go away and take this tree and your Yanomamo ornaments with you."

"You know the biggest problem I have as the Spirit of Christmas Present?" he said. He reached in the back pocket of his shorts and pulled out a brown garland of what looked like coffee beans. "My biggest problem is that people don't know what they want."

"I know what I want," Lauren said. "I don't want to have to write my Christmas cards all over again—"

"You didn't write them," he said, draping the garland over the branches. "They were printed. Do you know that the inks used on those cards contain harmful chemicals?"

"I don't want to be lectured on environmental issues, I don't want to have to fight my way through a forest to get to the refrigerator, and I don't want to have to turn down dates because I have a spirit in my apartment. I want a nice, quiet Christmas with no hassles. I want to exchange a few presents with my friends and go to the office Christmas party and . . . " And dazzle Scott Buckley in my off-the-shoulder black

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dress, she thought, but she decided she'd better not say that. The Spirit might decide Scott's clothes weren't made of natural fibers or something and turn him into a Yanomamo Indian.

". . . and have a nice, quiet Christmas," she finished lamely.

"Take *It's A Wonderful Life,*" the Spirit said, squinting at the tree. "I watched it this afternoon while you were at work. Jimmy Stewart didn't know what he wanted."

He reached in his pocket again and pulled out a crooked star made of Brazil nuts and twine. "He thought he wanted to go to college and travel and get rich, but what he *really* wanted was right there in front of him the whole time."

He did something, and the top of the tree lopped over in front of him. He tied the star on with the twine, and did something else. The tree straightened up. "You only think you want me to leave," he said.

Someone knocked on the door.

"You're right," Lauren said. "I don't want you to leave. I want you to stay right there." She ran into the living room.

The spirit followed her into the living room. "Luckily, being a spirit, I know what you really want," he said, and disappeared.

She opened the door to Fred. "He was just here," she said. "He disappeared when I opened the door, which is what all the crazies say, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Fred said. "Or else, 'He's right there. Can't you see him?' " He looked curiously around the room. "Where was he?"

"In the kitchen," she said, shutting the door. "Decorating a tree which probably isn't there either." She led him into the kitchen.

The tree was still there, and there were large brownish cards stuck all over it.

"You really do have a tree growing in your kitchen," Fred said, squatting down to look at the roots. "I wonder if the people downstairs have roots sticking out of their ceiling." He stood up. "What are these." he said, pointing at the brownish cards.

"Christmas cards." She pulled one off. "I told him I wanted mine back." She read the card aloud. " 'In the time it takes you to read this Christmas card, eighty-two harp seals will have been clubbed to death for their fur.' " She opened it up. " 'Happy Holidays.' "

"Cheery," Fred said. He took the card from her and turned it over. " 'This card is printed on recycled paper with vegetable inks and can be safely used as compost.' "

"Did anyone in the networks know how to club a spirit to death?" she asked.

"No. Didn't your sister have any ideas?"

"She didn't know how she got him in the first place. She and her Maharishi were channeling an Egyptian nobleman and he suddenly appeared, wearing a *Save the Dolphins* T-shirt. I got the idea the Maharishi was as surprised as she was." She sat down at the kitchen table. "I tried to get him to go away this afternoon, but he said he has to give me my

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heart's desire first." She looked up at Fred, who was cautiously sniffing one of the organic ornaments. "Didn't you find out anything on the networks?"

"I found out there are a lot of loonies with computers. What *are* these?"

"By-products of the Brazilian rain forest." She stood up. "I told him my heart's desire was for him to leave, and he said I didn't know what I really wanted."

"Which is what?"

"I don't know," she said. "I went into the living room to answer the door, and he said that luckily he knew what I wanted because he was a spirit, and I told him to stay right where he was, and he disappeared."

"Show me," he said.

She took him into the living room and pointed at where he'd been standing, and Fred squatted down again and peered at the carpet.

"How does he disappear?"

"I don't know. He just . . . isn't there."

Fred stood up. "Has he changed anything else? Besides the tree?"

"Not that I know of. He turned the TV on without the remote," she said, looking around the room. The shopping bags were still on the coffee table. She looked through them and pulled out the video. "Here. I'm your Secret Santa. I'm not supposed to give it to you till Christmas Eve, but maybe you'd better take it before he turns it into a snowy owl or something."

She handed it to him. "Go ahead. Open it."

He unwrapped it. "Oh," he said without enthusiasm. "Thanks."

"I remember last year at the party we talked about it, and I was afraid you might already have a copy. You don't, do you?"

"No," he said, still in that flat voice.

"Oh, good. I had a hard time finding it. You were right when you said we were the only two people in the world who liked *Miracle on 34th Street*. Everybody else I know thinks *It's A Wonderful Life* is—"

"You bought me *Miracle on 34th Street?*" he said, frowning.

"It's the original black-and-white version. I hate those colorized things, don't you? Everyone has gray teeth."

"Lauren." He held the box out to her so she could read the front. "I think your friend's been fixing things again."

She took the box from him. On the cover was a picture of Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed dancing the Charleston.

"Oh, no! That little rat!" she said. "He must have changed it when he was looking at it. He told me *It's A Wonderful Life* was his favorite movie."

"*Et tu, Brute?*" Fred said, shaking his head.

"Do you suppose he changed all my other Christmas presents?"

"We'd better check."

"If he has . . ." she said. She dropped to her knees and started rummaging through them.

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"Do you think they look the same?" Fred asked, squatting down beside her.

"*Your* present looked the same." She grabbed a package wrapped in red-and-gold paper and began feeling it. "Cassie's present is okay, I think."

"What is it?"

"A stapler. She's always losing hers. I put her name on it in Magic Marker." She handed it to him to feel.

"It feels like a stapler, all right," he said.

"I think we'd better open it and make sure."

Fred tore off the paper. "It's still a stapler," he said, looking at it. "What a great idea for a Christmas present! Everybody in Documentation's always losing their staplers. I think PMS steals them to use on their Christmas decorations." He handed it back to her. "Now you'll have to wrap it again."

"That's okay," Lauren said. "At least it wasn't a Yanomamo ornament."

"But it might be any minute," Fred said, straightening up. "There's no telling what he might take a notion to transform next. I think you'd better call your sister again, and ask her to ask the Maharishi if *he* knows how to send spirits back to the astral plane, and I'll go see what I can find out from the networks."

"Okay," Lauren said, following him to the door. "Don't take the videotape with you. Maybe I can get him to change it back."

"Maybe," Fred said, frowning. "You're sure he said he was here to give you your heart's desire?"

"I'm sure."

"Then why would he change my videotape?" he said thoughtfully. "It's too bad your sister couldn't have conjured up a nice, straightforward spirit."

"Like Santa Claus," Lauren said.

Her sister wasn't home. Lauren tried her off and on all evening, and when she finally got her, she couldn't talk. "The Maharishi and I are going to Barbados. They're having a harmonic divergence there on Christmas Eve, so don't worry about getting my present here by Christmas because I won't be back till the day after New Year's," she said and hung up.

"I don't even have her Christmas present bought yet," Lauren said to the couch, "and it's all your fault."

She went in the kitchen and glared at the tree. "I don't even dare go shopping because you might turn the couch into a humpbacked whale while I'm gone," she said, and then clapped her hand over her mouth.

She peered cautiously into the living room and then made a careful circuit of the whole apartment, looking for endangered species. There were no signs of any, and no sign of the spirit. She went back into the

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living room and turned on the TV. Jimmy Stewart was dancing the Charleston with Donna Reed. She picked up the remote and hit the channel button. Now he was singing, "Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come Out Tonight?"

She hit the automatic channel changer. Jimmy Stewart was on every channel except one. The Ghost of Christmas Present was on that one, telling Scrooge to change his ways. She watched the rest of *A Christmas Carol.* When it reached the part where the Cratchits were sitting down to their Christmas dinner, she remembered she hadn't had any supper and went in the kitchen.

The tree was completely blocking the cupboards, but by mightily pushing several branches aside she was able to get to the refrigerator. The eggnog was gone. So were the Stouffer's frozen entrees. The only thing in the refrigerator was a half-empty bottle of Evian water.

She shoved her way out of the kitchen and sat back down on the couch. Fred had told her to call if anything happened, but it was after eleven o'clock, and she had a feeling the eggnog had been gone for some time.

A Christmas Carol was over, and the opening credits were starting. "Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life.* Starring Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed."

She must have fallen asleep. When she woke up, *Miracle on 34th Street* was on, and the store manager was giving Edmund Gwenn as Macy's Santa Claus a list of toys he was supposed to push if Macy's didn't have what the children asked Santa for.

"Finally," Lauren said, watching Edmund Gwenn tear the list into pieces, "something good to watch," and promptly fell asleep. When she woke up again, John Payne and Maureen O'Hara were kissing and someone was knocking on the door.

I don't remember anyone knocking on the door, she thought groggily. John Payne told Maureen O'Hara how he'd convinced the State of New York Edmund Gwenn was Santa Claus, and then they both stared disbelievingly at a cane standing in the corner. "The End" came on the screen.

The knocking continued.

"Oh," Lauren said, and answered the door.

It was Fred, carrying a McDonald's sack.

"What time is it?" Lauren said, blinking at him.

"Seven o'clock. I brought you an Egg McMuffin and some orange juice."

"Oh, you wonderful person!" she said. She grabbed the sack and took it over to the coffee table. "You don't know what he did." She reached into the sack and pulled out the sandwich. "He transformed the food in my refrigerator into Evian water."

He was looking curiously at her. "Didn't you go to bed last night? He didn't come back, did he?"

"No, I waited for him, and I guess I fell asleep." She took a huge bite of the sandwich.

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Fred sat down beside her. "What's that?" He pointed to a pile of dollar bills on the coffee table.

"I don't know," Lauren said.

Fred picked up the bills. Under them was a handful of change and a pink piece of paper. ' "Returned three boxes Christmas cards for refund,' " Lauren said, reading it. " '$22.18.' "

"That's what's here," Fred said, counting the money. "He didn't turn your Christmas cards into a Douglas fir after all. He took them back and got a refund."

"Then that means the tree isn't in the kitchen!" she said, jumping up and running to look. "No, it doesn't." She came back and sat down on the couch.

"But at least you got your money back," Fred said. "And it fits in with what I learned from the networks last night. They think he's a friendly spirit, probably some sort of manifestation of the seasonal spirit. Apparently these are fairly common, variations of Santa Claus being the most familiar, but there are other ones, too. All benign. They think he's probably telling the truth about wanting to give you your heart's desire."

"Do they know how to get rid of him?" she asked, and took a bite.

"No. Apparently no one's ever wanted to exorcise one." He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. "I got a list of exorcism books to try, though, and this one guy, Clarence, said the most important thing in an exorcism is to know exactly what kind of spirit it is."

"How do we do that?" Lauren asked with her mouth full.

"By their actions, Clarence said. He said appearance doesn't mean anything because seasonal spirits are frequently in disguise. He said we need to write down everything the spirit's said and done, so I want you to tell me exactly what he did." He took a pen and a notebook out of his jacket pocket. "Everything from the first time you saw him."

"Just a minute." She finished the last bite of sandwich and took a drink of the orange juice. "Okay. He knocked on the door, and when I answered it, he told me he was here to give me a Christmas present, and I told him I wasn't interested, and I shut the door and started into the bedroom to hang up my dress and—my dress!" she gasped and went tearing into the bedroom.

"What's the matter?" Fred said, following her.

She flung the closet door open and began pushing clothes madly along the bar. "If he's transformed this—" She stopped pushing hangers. "I'll kill him," she said and lifted out a brownish collection of feathers and dried leaves. "Benign!?" she said. "Do you call that benign?!"

Fred gingerly touched a brown feather. "What was it?"

"A dress," she said. "My beautiful black, off-the-shoulder, drop-dead dress."

"Really?" he said doubtfully. He lifted up some of the brownish leaves. "I think it still is a dress," he said. "Sort of."

She crumpled the leaves and feathers against her and sank down on the bed. "All I wanted was to go to the office party!"

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"Don't you have anything else you can wear to the office party? What about that pretty red thing you wore last year?"

She shook her head emphatically. "Scott didn't even notice it!"

"And that's your heart's desire?" Fred said after a moment. "To have Scott Buckley notice you at the office party?"

"Yes, and he would have, too! It had sequins on it, and it fit perfectly!" She held out what might have been a sleeve. Greenish-brown pods dangled from brownish strips of bamboo. "And now he's ruined it!"

She flung the dress on the floor and stood up. "I don't care what this Clarence person says. He is not benign! And he is not trying to get me what I want for Christmas. He is trying to ruin my life!"

She saw the expression on Fred's face and stopped. "I'm sorry," she said. "None of this is your fault. You've been trying to help me."

"And I've been doing about as well as your spirit," he said. "Look, there has to be some way to get rid of him. Or at least get the dress back. Clarence said he knew some transformation spells. I'll go on to work and see what I can find out."

He went out into the living room and over to the door. "Maybe you can go back to the store and see if they have another dress like it." He opened the door.

"Okay." Lauren nodded. "I'm sorry I yelled at you. And you have been a lot of help."

"Right," he said glumly, and went out.

"Where'd you get that dress?" Jimmy Stewart said to Donna Reed.

Lauren whirled around. The TV was on. Donna Reed was showing Jimmy Stewart her new dress.

"Where are you?" Lauren demanded, looking at the couch. "I want you to change that dress back right now!"

"Don't you like it?" the spirit said from the bedroom. "It's completely biodegradable."

She stomped into the bedroom. He was putting the dress on the hanger and making little "tsk"-ing noises. "You have to be careful with natural fibers," he said reprovingly.

"Change it back the way it was. This instant."

"It was handmade by the Yanomamo Indians," he said, smoothing down what might be the skirt. "Do you realize that their natural habitat is being destroyed at the rate of seven hundred and fifty acres a day?"

"I don't care. I want my dress back."

He carried the dress on its hanger over to the chest. "It's so interesting. Donna Reed knew right away she was in love with Jimmy Stewart, but he was so busy thinking about college and his new suitcase, he didn't even know she existed." He hung up the dress. "He practically had to be hit over the head."

"I'll hit you over the head if you don't change that dress back this instant, Spirit," she said, looking around for something hard.

"Call me Chris," he said. "Did you know sequins are made from nonrenewable resources?" and disappeared as she swung the lamp.

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"And good riddance," she shouted to the air.

They had the dress in a size three. Lauren put herself through the indignity of trying to get into it and then went to work. The receptionist was watching Jimmy Stewart standing on the bridge in the snow, and weeping into a Kleenex. She handed Lauren her messages.

There were two memos from the PMS Committee—they were having a sleigh ride after work, and she was supposed to bring cheese puffs to the office party. There wasn't a message from Fred.

"Oh!" the receptionist wailed. "This is so sad!"

"I hate *It's a Wonderful Life*," Lauren said, and went up to her desk. "I hate Christmas," she said to Cassie.

"It's normal to hate Christmas," Cassie said, looking up from the book she was reading. "This book, it's called *Let's Forget Christmas*, says it's because everyone has these unrealistic expectations. When they get presents, they—"

"Oh, that reminds me," Lauren said. She rummaged in her bag and brought out Cassie's present, fingering it quickly to make sure it was still a stapler. It seemed to be. She held it out to Cassie. "Merry Christmas."

"I don't have yours wrapped yet," Cassie said. "I don't even have my wrapping paper bought yet. The book says I'm suffering from an avoidance complex." She picked up the package. "Do I have to open it now? I know it will be something I love, and you won't like what I got you half as well, and I'll feel incredibly guilty and inadequate."

"You don't have to open it now," Lauren said. "I just thought I'd better give it to you before—" She picked her messages up off her desk and started looking through them. "Before I forgot. There haven't been any messages from Fred, have there?"

"Yeah. He was here about fifteen minutes ago looking for you. He said to tell you the networks hadn't been any help, and he was going to try the library." She looked sadly at the present. "It's even wrapped great," she said gloomily. "I went shopping for a dress for the office party last night, and do you think I could find anything off-the-shoulder or with sequins? I couldn't even find anything I'd be caught dead in. Did you know the rate of stress-related illness at Christmas is seven times higher than the rest of the year?"

"I can relate to that," Lauren said.

"No, you can't. You didn't end up buying some awful gray thing with gold chains hanging all over it. At least Scott will notice me. He'll say, 'Hi, Cassie, are you dressed as Marley's ghost?' And there you'll be, looking fabulous in black sequins—"

"No, I won't," Lauren said.

"Why? Didn't they hold it for you?"

"It was . . . defective. Did Fred want to talk to me?"

"I don't know. He was on his way out. He had to pick up his Santa Claus suit. Oh, my God," her voice dropped to a whisper. "It's Scott Buckley."

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"Hi," Scott said to Lauren. "I was wondering if you could go shopping with me tonight." Lauren stared at him, so taken aback she couldn't speak.

"When you couldn't go last night, I decided to cancel my date."

"Uh . . . I . . ." she said.

"I thought we could buy the presents and then have some dinner."

She nodded.

"Great," Scott said. "I'll come over to your apartment around six-thirty."

"No!" Lauren said. "I mean, why don't we go straight from work?"

"Good idea. I'll come up here and get you." He smiled meltingly and left.

"I think I'll kill myself," Cassie said. "Did you know the rate of suicides at Christmas is four times higher than the rest of the year? He is so cute," she said, looking longingly down the hall after him. "There's Fred."

Lauren looked up. Fred was coming toward her desk with a Santa Claus costume and a stack of books. Lauren hurried across to him.

"This is everything the library had on exorcisms and the occult," Fred said, transferring half of the books to her arms. "I thought we could both go through them today, and then get together tonight and compare notes."

"Oh, I can't," Lauren said. "I promised Scott I'd help him pick out the presents for the office party tonight. I'm sorry. I could tell him I can't."

"Your heart's desire? Are you kidding?" He started awkwardly piling the books back on his load. "You go shopping. I'll go through the books and let you know if I come up with anything."

"Are you sure?" she said guiltily. "I mean, you shouldn't have to do all the work."

"It's my pleasure," he said. He started to walk away and then stopped. "You didn't tell the spirit Scott was your heart's desire, did you?"

"Of course not. Why?"

"I was just wondering . . . nothing. Never mind." He walked off down the hall. Lauren went back to her desk.

"Did you know the rate of depression at Christmas is sixteen times higher than the rest of the year?" Cassie said. She handed Lauren a package.

"What's this?"

"It's from your Secret Santa."

Lauren opened it. It was a large book entitled, *It's a Wonderful Life: The Photo Album.* On the cover, Jimmy Stewart was looking depressed.

"I figure it'll take a half hour or so to pick out the presents," Scott said, leading her past two inflatable palm trees into The Upscale Oasis. "And then we can have some supper and get acquainted." He lay down on a massage couch. "What do you think about this?"

"How many presents do we have to buy?" Lauren asked, looking

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around the store. There were a lot of inflatable palm trees, and a jukebox, and several life-size cardboard cutouts of Malcolm Forbes and Leona Helmsley. Against the far wall were two high-rise aquariums and a bank of televisions with neon-outlined screens.

"Seventy-two." He got up off the massage couch, handed her the list of employees and went over to a display of brown boxes tied with twine. "What about these? They're handmade Yanomamo Christmas ornaments."

"No," Lauren said. "How much money do we have to spend?"

"The PMS Committee budgeted six thousand, and there was five hundred left in the Sunshine fund. We can spend . . ." He picked up a pocket calculator in the shape of Donald Trump and punched several buttons. "Ninety dollars per person, including tax. How about pet costume jewelry?" He held up a pair of rhinestone earrings for German shepherds.

"We got those last year," Lauren said. She picked up a digital umbrella and put it back down.

"How about a car fax?" Scott said. "No, wait. This, this is it!"

Lauren turned around. Scott was holding up what looked like a gold cordless phone. "It's an investment pager," he said, punching keys. "See, it gives you the Dow Jones, treasury bonds, interest rates. Isn't it perfect?"

"Well," Lauren said.

"See, this is the hostile takeover alarm, and every time the Federal Reserve adjusts the interest rate it beeps."

Lauren read the tag. " 'Portable Plutocrat. $74.99.' "

"Great," Scott said. "We'll have money left over."

"To invest," Lauren said.

He went off to see if they had seventy-two of them, and Lauren wandered over to the bank of televisions.

There was a videotape of *Miracle on 34th Street* lying on top of the VCR/shower massage. Lauren looked around to see if anyone was watching and then popped the *Wonderful Life* tape out and stuck in *Miracle.*

A dozen Edmund Gwenns dressed as Macy's Santa Claus appeared on the screens, listening to twelve store managers tell them which overstocked toys to push.

Scott came over, lugging four shopping bags. "They come gift wrapped," he said happily, showing her a Portable Plutocrat wrapped in green paper with gold dollar signs. "Which gives us a free evening."

"That's what I've been fighting against for years," a dozen Edmund Gwenns said, tearing a dozen lists to bits, "the way they commercialize Christmas."

"What I thought," Scott said when they got in the car, "was that instead of going out for supper, we'd take these over to your apartment and order in."

"Order in?" Lauren said, clutching the bag of Portable Plutocrats on her lap to her.

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"I know a great Italian place that delivers. Angel hair pasta, wine, everything. Or, if you'd rather, we could run by the grocery store and pick up some stuff to cook."

"Actually, my kitchen's kind of a mess," she said. There is a Christmas tree in it, she thought, with organic byproducts hanging on it.

He pulled up outside her apartment building. "Then Italian it is." He got out of the car and began unloading shopping bags. "You like prosciutto? They have a great melon and prosciutto."

"Actually, the whole apartment's kind of a disaster," Lauren said, following him up the stairs. "You know, wrapping presents and everything. There are ribbons and tags and paper all over the floor—"

"Great," he said, stopping in front of her door. "We have to put tags on the presents, anyway."

"They don't need tags, do they?" Lauren said desperately. "I mean, they're all exactly alike."

"It personalizes them," he said, "it shows the gift was chosen especially for them." He looked expectantly at the key in her hand and then at the door.

She couldn't hear the TV, which was a good sign. And every time Fred had come over, the spirit had disappeared. So all I have to do is keep him out of the kitchen, she thought.

She opened the door and Scott pushed past her and dumped the shopping bags on the coffee table. "Sorry," he said. "Those were really heavy." He straightened up and looked around the living room. There was no sign of the Spirit, but there were three Evian water bottles on the coffee table. "This doesn't look too messy. You should see my apartment. I'll bet your kitchen's neater than mine, too."

Lauren walked swiftly over to the kitchen and pulled the door shut. "I wouldn't bet on it. Aren't there still some more presents to bring up?"

"Yeah. I'll go get them. Shall I call the Italian place first?"

"No," Lauren said, standing with her back against the kitchen door. "Why don't you bring the bags up first?"

"Okay," he said, smiling meltingly, and went out.

Lauren leaped to the door, put the deadbolt and the chain on, and then ran back to the kitchen and opened the door. The tree was still there. She pulled the door hastily to and walked rapidly into the bedroom. He wasn't there, or in the bathroom. "Thank you," she breathed, looking heavenward, and went back in the living room.

The TV was on. Edmund Gwenn was shouting at the store psychologist.

"You know, you were right," the spirit said. He was stretched out on the couch, wearing a "Save the Black-Footed Ferret" T-shirt and jeans. "It's not a bad movie. Of course, it's not as good as *It's a Wonderful Life,* but I like the way everything works out at the end."

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, glancing anxiously at the door.

"Watching *Miracle on 34th Street,*" he said, pointing at the screen. Edmund Gwenn was brandishing his cane at the store psychiatrist. "I

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like the part where Edmund Gwenn asks Natalie Wood what she wants for Christmas, and she shows him the picture of the house."

Lauren picked up Fred's video and brandished it at him. "Fine. Then you can change Fred's video back."

"Okay," he said and did something. She looked at Fred's video. It showed Edmund Gwenn hugging Natalie Wood in front of a yellow moon with Santa Claus's sleigh and reindeer flying across it. Lauren put the video hastily down on the coffee table.

"Thank you," she said. "And my dress."

"Natalie Wood doesn't really want a house, of course. What she really wants is for Maureen O'Hara to marry John Payne. The house is just a symbol for what she really wants."

On the TV Edmund Gwenn rapped the store psychologist smartly on the forehead with his cane.

There was a knock on the door. "It's me," Scott said.

"I also like the part where Edmund Gwenn yells at the store manager for pushing merchandise nobody wants. Christmas presents should be something the person wants. Aren't you going to answer the door?"

"Aren't you going to disappear?" she whispered.

"Disappear?" he said incredulously. "The movie isn't over. And besides, I still haven't gotten you what you want for Christmas." He did something, and a bowl of trail mix appeared on his stomach.

Scott knocked again.

Lauren went over to the door and opened it two inches.

"It's me," Scott said. "Why do you have the chain on?"

"I . . ." She looked hopefully at Chris. He was eating trail mix and watching Maureen O'Hara bending over the store psychologist, trying to wake him up.

"Scott, I'm sorry, but I think I'd better take a rain check on supper."

He looked bewildered. And cute. "But I thought . . ." he said.

So did I, she thought. But I have a spirit on my couch who's perfectly capable of turning you into a Yanomamo by-product.

"The Italian take-out sounds great," she said, "but it's kind of late, and we've both got to go to work tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's Saturday."

"Uh . . . I meant go to work on wrapping presents. Tomorrow's Christmas Eve, and I haven't even started my wrapping. And I have to make cheese puffs for the office party and wash my hair and . . ."

"Okay, okay, I get the message," he said. "I'll just bring in the presents and then leave."

She thought of telling him to leave them in the hall, and then closed the door a little and took the chain off the door.

Go *away*! she thought at the spirit, who was eating trail mix.

She opened the door far enough so she could slide out, and pulled it to behind her. "Thanks for a great evening," she said, taking the shopping bags from Scott. "Good night."

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"Good night," he said, still looking bewildered. He started down the hall. At the stairs he turned and smiled meltingly.

I'm going to kill him, Lauren thought, waving back, and took the shopping bags inside.

The spirit wasn't there. The trail mix was still on the couch, and the TV was still on.

"Come back here!" she shouted. "You little rat! You have ruined my dress and my date, and you're not going to ruin anything else! You're going to change back my dress and my Christmas cards, and you are going to get that tree out of my kitchen right *now!*"

Her voice hung in the air. She sat down on the couch, still holding the shopping bags. On the TV, Edmund Gwenn was sitting in Bellevue, staring at the wall.

"At least Scott finally noticed me," she said, and set the shopping bags down on the coffee table. They rattled.

"Oh, no!" she said. "Not the plutocrats!"

"The problem is," Fred said, closing the last of the books on the occult, "that we can't exorcise him if we don't know which seasonal spirit he is, and he doesn't fit the profiles of any of these. He must be in disguise."

"I don't want to exorcise him," Lauren said. "I want to kill him."

"Even if we did manage to exorcise him, there'd be no guarantee that the things he's changed would go back to their original state."

"And I'd be stuck with explaining what happened to six thousand dollars' worth of Christmas presents."

"Those portable plutocrats cost six thousand dollars?"

"$5895.36."

Fred gave a low whistle. "Did your spirit say why he didn't like them? Other than the obvious, I mean. That they were nonbiodegradable or something?"

"No. He didn't even notice them. He was watching *Miracle on 34th Street*, and he was talking about how he liked the way things worked out at the end and the part about the house."

"Nothing about Christmas presents?"

"I don't remember." She sank down on the couch. "Yes, I do. He said he liked the part where Edmund Gwenn yelled at the store manager for talking people into buying things they didn't want. He said Christmas presents should be something the person wanted."

"Well, that explains why he transformed the plutocrats then," Fred said. "It probably also means there's no way you can talk him into changing them back. And I've got to have something to pass out at the office party, or you'll be in trouble. So we'll just have to come up with replacement presents."

"Replacement presents?" Lauren said. "How? It's ten o'clock, the office party's tomorrow night, and how do we know he won't transform the replacement presents once we've got them?"

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"We'll buy people what they want. Was six thousand all the money you and Scott had?"

"No," Lauren said, rummaging through one of the shopping bags. "PMS budgeted sixty-five hundred."

"How much have you got left?"

She pulled out a sheaf of papers. "He didn't transform the purchase orders or the receipt," she said, looking at them. "The investment pagers cost $5895.36. We have $604.64 left." She handed him the papers. "That's eight dollars and thirty-nine cents apiece."

He looked at the receipt speculatively and then into the shopping bag. "I don't suppose we could take these back and get a refund from the Upscale Oasis?"

"They're not going to give us $5895.36 for seventy-two 'Save the Ozone Layer' buttons," Lauren said. "And there's nothing we can buy for eight dollars that will convince PMS it cost sixty-five hundred. And where am I going to get the money to pay back the difference?"

"I don't think you'll have to. Remember when the spirit changed your Christmas cards into the tree? He didn't really. He returned them somehow to the store and got a refund. Maybe he's done the same thing with the Plutocrats and the money will turn up on your coffee table tomorrow morning."

"And if it doesn't?"

"We'll worry about that tomorrow. Right now we've got to come up with presents to pass out at the party."

"Like what?"

"Staplers."

"Staplers?"

"Like the one you got Cassie. Everybody in my department's always losing their staplers, too. And their tape dispensers. It's an office party. We'll buy everybody something they want for the office."

"But how will we know what that is? There are seventy-two people on this list."

"We'll call the department heads and ask them, and then we'll go shopping." He stood up. "Where's your phone book?"

"Next to the tree." She followed him into the kitchen. "How are we going to go shopping? It's ten o'clock at night."

"Bizmart's open till eleven," he said, opening the phone book, "and the grocery store's open all night. We'll get as many of the presents as we can tonight and the rest tomorrow morning, and that still gives us all afternoon to get them wrapped. How much wrapping paper do you have?"

"Lots. I bought it half-price last year when I decided this Christmas was going to be different. A stapler doesn't seem like much of a present."

"It does if it's what you wanted." He reached for the phone.

It rang. Fred picked up the receiver and handed it to Lauren.

"Oh, Lauren," Cassie's voice said. "I just opened your present, and I *love* it! It's exactly what I wanted!"

"Really?" Lauren said.

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"It's perfect! I was so depressed about Christmas and the office party and still not having my shopping done. I wasn't even going to open it, but in *Let's Forget Christmas* it said you should open your presents early so they wouldn't ruin Christmas morning, and I did, and it's wonderful! I don't even care whether Scott notices me or not! Thank you!"

"You're welcome," Lauren said, but Cassie had already hung up. She looked at Fred. "That was Cassie. You were right about people liking staplers." She handed him the phone. "You call the department heads. I'll get my coat."

He took the phone and began to punch in numbers, and then put it down. "What exactly did the spirit say about the ending of *Miracle on 34th Street?*"

"He said he liked the way everything worked out at the end. Why?"

He looked thoughtful. "Maybe we're going about this all wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"What if the spirit really does want to give you your heart's desire, and all this transforming stuff is some roundabout way of doing it? Like the angel in *It's a Wonderful Life*. He's supposed to save Jimmy Stewart from committing suicide, and instead of doing something logical, like talking him out of it or grabbing him, he jumps in the river so Jimmy Stewart has to save *him*."

"You're saying he turned seventy-two Portable Plutocrats into 'Save the Ozone Layer' buttons to help me?"

"I don't know. All I'm saying is that maybe you should tell him you want to go to the office party in a black sequined dress with Scott Buckley and see what happens."

"See what happens? After what he did to my dress? If he knew I wanted Scott, he'd probably turn him into a Brazilian rainforest by-product." She put on her coat. "Well, are we going to call the department heads or not?"

The Graphic Design department wanted staplers, and so did Accounts Payable. Accounts Receivable, which was having an outbreak of stress-related Christmas colds, wanted Puffs Plus and cough drops. Document Control wanted scissors.

Fred looked at the list, checking off Systems and the other departments they'd called. "All we've got left is the PMS Committee," he said.

"I know what to get them," Lauren said. "Copies of *Let's Forget Christmas*."

They got some of the things before Bizmart closed, and Fred was back at nine Saturday morning to do the rest of it. At the bookstore they ran into the woman who had been stapling presents together the day Lauren enlisted Fred's help.

"I completely forgot my husband's first wife," she said, looking desperate, "and I don't have any idea of what to get her."

Fred handed her the videotape of *It's a Wonderful Life* they were giving the receptionist. "How about one of these?" he said.

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"Do you think she'll like it?"

"*Everybody* likes it," Fred said.

"Especially the part where the bad guy steals the money, and Jimmy Stewart races around town trying to replace it," Lauren said.

It took them most of the morning to get the rest of the presents and forever to wrap them. By four they weren't even half done.

"What's next?" Fred asked, tying the bow on the last of the staplers. He stood up and stretched.

"Cough drops," Lauren said, cutting a length of red paper with Santa Clauses on it.

He sat back down. "Ah, yes. Accounts Receivable's heart's desire."

"What's your heart's desire?" Lauren asked, folding the paper over the top of the cough drops and taping it. "What would you ask for if the spirit inflicted himself on you?"

Fred unreeled a length of ribbon. "Well, not to go to an office party, that's for sure. The only year I even had a remotely good time was last year, talking to you."

"I'm serious," Lauren said. She taped the sides and handed the package to Fred. "What do you really want for Christmas?"

"When I was eight, I asked for a computer for Christmas. Home computers were new then and they were pretty expensive, and I wasn't sure I'd get it. I was a lot like Natalie Wood in *Miracle on 34th Street*. I didn't believe in Santa Claus, and I didn't believe in miracles, but I really wanted it."

He cut off the length of ribbon, wrapped it around the package, and tied it in a knot.

"Did you get the computer?"

"No," he said, cutting off shorter lengths of ribbon. "Christmas morning I came downstairs, and there was a note telling me to look in the garage." He opened the scissors and pulled the ribbon across the blade, making it curl. "It was a puppy. The thing was, a computer was too expensive, but there was an outside chance I'd get it, or I wouldn't have asked for it. Kids don't ask for stuff they *know* is impossible."

"And you hadn't asked for a puppy because you knew you couldn't have one?"

"No, you don't understand. There are things you don't ask for because you know you can't have them, and then there are things so far outside the realm of possibility, it would never even occur to you to want them." He made the curled ribbon into a bow and fastened it to the package.

"So what you're saying is your heart's desire is something so far outside the realm of possibility you don't even know what it is?"

"I didn't say that," he said. He stood up again. "Do you want some eggnog?"

"Yes, thanks. If it's still there."

He went in the kitchen. She could hear forest-thrashing noises and the refrigerator opening. "It's still here," he said.

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"It's funny Chris hasn't been back," she called to Fred. "I keep worrying he must be up to something."

"Chris?" Fred said. He came back into the living room with two glasses of eggnog.

"The spirit. He told me to call him that," she said. "It's short for Spirit of Christmas Present." Fred was frowning. "What's wrong?" Lauren asked.

"I wonder . . . nothing. Never mind." He went over to the TV. "I don't suppose *Miracle on 34th Street*'s on TV this afternoon?"

"No, but I made him change your video back." She pointed. "It's there, on top of the TV."

He turned on the TV, inserted the video, and hit play. He came and sat down beside Lauren. She handed him the wrapped box of cough drops, but he didn't take it. He was watching the TV. Lauren looked up. On the screen, Jimmy Stewart was walking past Donna Reed's house, racketing a stick along the picket fence.

"That isn't *Miracle*," Lauren said. "He told me he changed it back." She snatched up the box. It still showed Edmund Gwenn hugging Natalie Wood. "That little sneak! He only changed the box!"

She glared at the TV. On the screen Jimmy Stewart was glaring at Donna Reed.

"It's all right," Fred said, taking the package and reaching for the ribbon. "It's not a bad movie. The ending's too sentimental, and it doesn't really make sense. I mean, one minute everything's hopeless, and Jimmy Stewart's ready to kill himself, and then the angel convinces him he had a wonderful life, and suddenly everything's okay." He looked around the table, patting the spread-out wrapping paper. "But it has its moments. Have you seen the scissors?"

Lauren handed him one of the pairs they'd bought. "We'll wrap them last."

On the TV Jimmy was sitting in Donna Reed's living room, looking awkward. "What I have trouble with is Jimmy Stewart's being so self-sacrificing," she said, cutting a length of red paper with Santa Clauses on it. "I mean, he gives up college so his brother can go, and then when his brother has a chance at a good job, he gives up college *again*. He even gives up committing suicide to save Clarence. There's such a thing as being too self-sacrificing, you know."

"Maybe he gives up things because he thinks he doesn't deserve them."

"Why wouldn't he?"

"He's never gone to college, he's poor, he's deaf in one ear. Sometimes when people are handicapped or overweight they just assume they can't have the things other people have."

The telephone rang. Lauren reached for it and then realized it was on TV.

"Oh, hello, Sam," Donna Reed said, looking at Jimmy Stewart.

"Can you help me with this ribbon?" Fred said.

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"Sure," Lauren said. She scooted closer to him and put her finger on the crossed ribbon to hold it taut.

Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed were standing very close together, listening to the telephone. The voice on the phone was saying something about soybeans.

Fred still hadn't tied the knot. Lauren glanced at him. He was looking at the TV, too.

Jimmy Stewart was looking at Donna Reed, his face nearly touching her hair. Donna Reed looked at him and then away. The voice from the phone was saying something about the chance of a lifetime, but it was obvious neither of them were hearing a word. Donna Reed looked up at him. His lips almost touched her forehead. They didn't seem to be breathing.

Lauren realized she wasn't either. She looked at Fred. He was holding the two ends of ribbon, one in each hand, and looking down at her.

"The knot," she said. "You haven't tied it."

"Oh," he said. "Sorry."

Jimmy Stewart dropped the phone with a clatter and grabbed Donna Reed by both arms. He began shaking her, yelling at her, and then suddenly she was wrapped in his arms, and he was smothering her with kisses.

"The knot," Fred said. "You have to pull your finger out."

She looked blankly at him and then down at the package. He had tied the knot over her finger, which was still pressing against the wrapping paper.

"Oh. Sorry," she said, and pulled her finger free. "You were right. It does have its moments."

He yanked the knot tight. "Yeah," he said. He reached for the spool of ribbon and began chopping off lengths for the bow. On the screen Donna Reed and Jimmy Stewart were being pelted with rice.

"No. You were right," he said. "He is too self-sacrificing." He waved the scissors at the screen. "In a minute he's going to give up his honeymoon to save the building and loan. It's a wonder he ever asked Donna Reed to marry him. It's a wonder he didn't try to fix her up with that guy on the phone."

The phone rang. Lauren looked at the screen, thinking it must be in the movie, but Jimmy Stewart was kissing Donna Reed in a taxicab.

"It's the phone," Fred said.

Lauren scrambled up and reached for it.

"Hi," Scott said.

"Oh, hello, Scott," Lauren said, looking at Fred.

"I was wondering about the office party tonight," Scott said. "Would you like to go with me? I could come get you and we could take the presents over together."

"Uh . . . I . . ." Lauren said. She put her hand over the receiver. "It's Scott. What am I going to tell him about the presents?"

Fred motioned her to give him the phone. "Scott," he said. "Hi. It's

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Fred Hatch. Yeah, Santa Claus. Listen, we ran into a problem with the presents."

Lauren closed her eyes.

"We got a call from the Upscale Oasis that investment pagers were being recalled by the Federal Safety Commission."

Lauren opened her eyes. Fred smiled at her. "Yeah. For excessive cupidity."

Lauren grinned.

"But there's nothing to worry about," Fred said. "We replaced them. We're wrapping them right now. No, it was no trouble. I was happy to help. Yeah, I'll tell her." He hung up. "Scott will be here to take you to the office party at seven-thirty," he said. "It looks like you're going to get your heart's desire after all."

"Yeah," Lauren said, looking at the TV. On the screen, the building and loan was going under.

They finished wrapping the pair of scissors at six-thirty, and Fred went back to his apartment to change clothes and get his Santa Claus costume. Lauren packed the presents in three of the Upscale Oasis shopping bags, said sternly, "Don't you dare touch these," to the empty couch, and went to get ready.

She showered and did her hair, and then went into the bedroom to see if the spirit had biodegraded her red dress, or, by some miracle, brought the black off-the-shoulder one back. He hadn't.

She put on the red dress and went back in the living room. It was only a little after seven. She turned on the TV and put Fred's video in the VCR. She hit play. Edmund Gwenn was giving the doctor the X-ray machine he'd always wanted.

Lauren picked up one of the shopping bags and felt the top pair of scissors to make sure they weren't Yanomamo ornaments. There was an envelope stuck between two of the packages. Inside was a check for $5895.36. It was made out to the Children's Hospital fund.

She shook her head, smiling, and put the check back in the envelope.

On TV Maureen O'Hara and John Payne were watching Natalie Wood run through an empty house and out the back door to look for her swing. They looked seriously at each other. Lauren held her breath. John Payne moved forward and kissed Maureen O'Hara.

Someone knocked on the door. "That's Scott," Lauren said to John Payne, and waited till Maureen O'Hara had finished telling him she loved him before she went to open the door.

It was Fred, carrying a foil-covered plate. He was wearing the same sweater and pants he'd worn to wrap the presents. "Cheese puffs," he said. "I figured you couldn't get to your stove." He looked seriously at her. "I wouldn't worry about not having your black dress to dazzle Scott with."

He went over and set the cheese puffs on the coffee table. "You need

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to take the foil off and heat them in a microwave for two minutes on high. Tell PMS to put the presents in Santa's bag, and I'll be there at eleven-thirty."

"Aren't you going to the party?"

"Office parties are your idea of fun, not mine," he said. "Besides, *Miracle on 34th Street*'s on at eight. It may be the only chance I have to watch it."

"But I wanted you—"

There was a knock on the door. "That's Scott," Lauren said.

"Well," Fred said, "if the spirit doesn't do something in the next fifteen seconds, you'll have your heart's desire in spite of him." He opened the door. "Come on in," he said. "Lauren and the presents are all ready." He handed two of the shopping bags to Scott.

"I really appreciate your helping Lauren and me with all this," Scott said.

Fred handed the other shopping bag to Lauren. "It was my pleasure."

"I wish you were coming with us," she said.

"And give up a chance of seeing the real Santa Claus?" He held the door open. "You two had better get going before something happens."

"What do you mean?" Scott said, alarmed. "Do you think these presents might be recalled, too?"

Lauren looked hopefully at the couch and then the TV. On the screen Jimmy Stewart was standing on the bridge in the snow, getting ready to kill himself.

"Afraid not," Fred said.

It was snowing by the time they pulled into the parking lot at work. "It was really selfless of Fred to help you wrap all those presents," Scott said, holding the lobby door open for Lauren. "He's a nice guy."

"Yes," Lauren said. "He is."

"Hey, look at that!" Scott said. He pointed at the security monitor. "*It's a Wonderful Life.* My favorite movie!"

On the monitor Jimmy Stewart was running through the snow, shouting, "Merry Christmas!"

"Scott," Lauren said, "I can't go to the party with you."

"Just a minute, okay?" Scott said, staring at the screen. "This is my favorite part." He set the shopping bags down on the receptionist's desk and leaned his elbows on it. "This is the part where Jimmy Stewart finds out what a wonderful life he's had."

"You have to take me home," Lauren said.

There was a gust of cold air and snow. Lauren turned around.

"You forgot your cheese puffs," Fred said, holding out the foil-covered plate to Lauren.

"There's such a thing as being too self-sacrificing, you know," Lauren said.

He held the plate out to her. "That's what the spirit said."

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"He came back?" She shot a glance at the shopping bags.

"Yeah. Right after you left. Don't worry about the presents. He said he thought the staplers were a great idea. He also said not to worry about getting a Christmas present for your sister."

"My sister!" Lauren said, clapping her hand to her mouth. "I completely forgot about her."

"He said since you didn't like it, he sent her the Yanomamo dress."

"She'll love it," Lauren said.

"He also said it was a wonder Jimmy Stewart ever got Donna Reed, he was so busy giving everybody else what they wanted," he said, looking seriously at her.

"He's right," Lauren said. "Did he also tell you Jimmy Stewart was incredibly stupid for wanting to go off to college when Donna Reed was right there in front of him?"

"He mentioned it."

"What a great movie!" Scott said, turning to Lauren. "Ready to go up?"

"No," Lauren said. "I'm going with Fred to see a movie." She took the cheese puffs from Fred and handed them to Scott.

"What am I supposed to do with these?"

"Take the foil off," Fred said, "and put them in a microwave for two minutes."

"But you're my date," Scott said. "Who am I supposed to go with?"

There was a gust of cold air and snow. Everyone turned around.

"How do I look?" Cassie said, taking off her coat.

"Wow!" Scott said. "You look terrific!"

Cassie spun around, her shoulders bare, the sequins glittering on her black dress. "Lauren gave it to me for Christmas," she said happily. "I love Christmas, don't you?"

"I *love* that dress," Scott said.

"He also told me," Fred said, "that his favorite thing in *Miracle on 34th Street* was Santa Claus's being in disguise—"

"He wasn't in disguise," Lauren said. "Edmund Gwenn told everybody he was Santa Claus."

Fred held up a correcting finger. "He told everyone his name was Kris Kringle."

"Chris," Lauren said.

"Oh, I love this part," Cassie said.

Lauren looked at her. She was standing next to Scott, watching Jimmy Stewart standing next to Donna Reed and singing "Auld Lang Syne."

"He makes all sorts of trouble for everyone," Fred said. "He turns Christmas upside down—"

"Completely disrupts Maureen O'Hara's life," Lauren said.

"But by the end, everything's worked out, the doctor has his X-ray machine, Natalie Wood has her house—"

"Maureen O'Hara has Fred—"

"And no one's quite sure how he did it, or if he did anything."

"Or if he had the whole thing planned from the beginning." She looked

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seriously at Fred. "He told me I only thought I knew what I wanted for Christmas."

Fred moved toward her. "He told me just because something seems impossible doesn't mean a miracle can't happen."

"What a great ending!" Cassie said, sniffling. "*It's a Wonderful Life* is my favorite movie."

"Mine, too," Scott said. "Do you know how to heat up cheese puffs?" He turned to Lauren and Fred. "Cut that out, you two, we'll be late for the party."

"We're not going," Fred said, taking Lauren's arm. They started for the door. "*Miracle*'s on at eight."

"But you can't leave," Scott said. "What about all these presents? Who's going to pass them out?"

There was a gust of cold air and snow. "Ho ho ho," Santa Claus said.

"Isn't that your costume, Fred?" Lauren said.

"Yes. It has to be back at the rental place by Monday morning," he said to Santa Claus. "And no changing it into rainforest by-products."

"*Mer*ry Christmas!" Santa Claus said.

"I like the way things worked out at the end," Lauren said.

"All we need is a cane standing in the corner," Fred said.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Santa Claus said. "Where are all these presents I'm supposed to pass out?"

"Right here," Scott said. He handed one of the shopping bags to Santa Claus.

"Plastic shopping bags," Santa Claus said, making a "tsk"-ing sound. "You should be using recycled paper."

"Sorry," Scott said. He handed the cheese puffs to Cassie and picked up the other two shopping bags. "Ready, Cassie?"

"We can't go yet," Cassie said, gazing at the security monitor. "Look, *It's a Wonderful Life* is just starting." On the screen Jimmy Stewart's brother was falling through the ice. "This is my favorite part," she said.

"Mine, too," Scott said, and went over to stand next to her.

Santa Claus squinted curiously at the monitor for a moment and then shook his head. "*Miracle on 34th Street*'s a much better movie, you know," he said reprovingly. "More realistic."●

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Thick Shake

Shivering World
By Kathy Tyers
Spectra, $4.50 (paper)

Kathy Tyers' new novel, *Shivering World,* is a bit too thick. Now I don't mean that in the British sense, of being beyond belief, nor do I mean it in the literal sense—it runs a sensible 421 pages. I mean thick in the sense of a dense fruitcake, or one of the heavier metals; into plot, setting, characters, and action she has crammed so much that the novel, good though it is, makes for effortful reading just to keep track of who's doing what and with what and to whom. It will take my maximum wordage just to give you an idea of the setup. . . .

The setting is a busy, interstellar future with much trade and human activity in general throughout the explored part of the galaxy. Much of this activity is devoted to terraforming likely worlds, for which there are specific corporations. In the case of our plot, it's the Gaea Consortium which is terraforming an unpromising world called Goddard for a group called the Lwuites, a sect devoted to one of many mixed scientific/religious beliefs that have sprung up, particularly since the "Twenty-twenty Troubles" when problems raised by genetic genegineering came close to wars between artificial strains of mankind. Now genegineering is strictly prohibited and monitored by the Eugenics Board, but there are suspicions that the Lwuite colonists are perhaps still experimenting in that direction, particularly in the area of aggressiveness of the male (this has been a female dominated society since "a twentieth-century Golden Age of near equality").

Onto Goddard arrives Grasha Brady-Philips, to work with the Gaean terraforming people—she has taken the job for the good pay, but does not know that she has been maneuvered into it by her mother, who is a high official in the Eugenics Board. Grasha also hopes that the Lwuites's possible illegal experimentation might help her, since she is the victim of a rare gene condition the cure for which is forbidden by the Eugenics Board.

There is intrigue in the Lwuite community. There is intrigue in the Gaean terraforming expedition. There is obviously intrigue from the Eugenics Board, and we haven't even mentioned the possible murder of Grasha's predecessor, or the stowaway who was on board her arrival craft—the son of one of the richest and most famous performing musicians of the known universe, an ugly duckling

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who has run away because his father more or less wants to terraform *him* into a swan to incorporate into his act.

And that's only the opening curtain! Now I'm not even grousing at Tyers for incoherence—for the most part, she keeps her narrative surprisingly clear, though I must admit I tend to glaze over at sentences such as "Cheney was genetically homozygous for all six chromosome pairs" and "... he had done cranial injections to protect the corpus callosum at that stage without diminishing primary sexual development." But there's not that much of that sort of thing, and it establishes a scientific validity for a novel as much about artificial gene manipulation as it is about terraforming, which is a lot. So we're back to *Shivering World* being a bit too thick—if you drop a stitch while reading, you stand a good chance of getting lost. But the story's a good one, and the SF backing is solid, so—better too thick than too thin.

That New Black Magic

The Magic of Recluce

By L. E. Modesitt, Jr.
Tor, $19.95

Now it's a known fact that you *have* to start your SF or fantasy novel with action—a battle, a chase, whatever. How many times have you begun a book and found yourself up to here in clashing armies or space fleets, having to wait until several chapters go by before you are given the dimmest idea of *why* the armies or fleets are clashing (if then, given the foggy notion so many young authors seem to have about the art of exposition)?

It interests me that two of the most effective of recent fantasies (and we're talking "high," "heroic," "Tolkienesque," however you want to label that subgenre) have broken this rule absolutely blatantly. Robert Jordan's *The Eye of the World* moves barely an inch until its sixtieth page, when it takes off and doesn't stop. L. E. Modesitt, Jr.'s *The Magic of Recluce* goes even farther. There is a minimum of physical action in the story; the conflict is between two philosophies of magic, and even these are not made all that clear. In fact, about all you start out with is that one form represents and is fueled by chaos, and is represented by the color (if it can be called a color) white. Why white? "White is the combination of all colored light. Black represents order; it is pure because it is absent all light."

So right there you have a nicely topsy-turvy thesis to wrestle with; it's your black magic and magicians that are the white hats here. Where is here? A magic world, feudally political, but aware of such things as steam power and guns (which represent one of the earliest arguments in the book as to which instruments represent order, which chaos). Recluce is an island continent where order reigns; it is a kind of Utopia, but our initial view of it is a rigid one, as seen through the eyes of young Lerris, who cannot accept it. His potter mother and scholar father seem the height of ordinariness, and he is bored at being an apprentice woodworker for his uncle. He makes his ennui so very evident that he is, by custom, given the choice of permanent exile from Re-

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cluce or apprenticeship in the *dangergeld,* which so far as he knows (and the reader is told) is a sort of Recluce Secret Service, spread through the other realms (devoted to chaos by Recluce standards). He chooses the dangergeld, receives some training with a group of other malcontents (loaded word—they simply do not fit into the Recluce pattern as they are), and is sent out into the wide world of chaos.

From here, the basic story is a very familiar one—that of the young person with powers discovering those powers and how to use them (the neophyte necromancer subgenre, one might call it). But Lerris's adventures are very low key and very oblique. At one point half-way through the book, he bursts forth with "I still didn't have the faintest idea of the problem or cause or whatever-it-was I was supposed to resolve. This business of blind traveling . . . was getting tiresome, if not plain boring." The reader in search of the above-mentioned clashing armies might well agree. Lerris's adventures are of another order, subtle, slow, sometimes downright pastoral. But some of those thunderstorms in the background as he makes his way across the chaotic continent of Candar are far from natural. The white magicians are aware that there is a growing power in their midst, and the menace threatening Lerris grows in proportion and it does indeed end in a order/chaos confrontation.

This is a very special fantasy, original less in its content than in its slow and thoughtful use of familiar fantastic elements and its skillful development of character (and this includes one major animal, a pony named Gairloch). And it should be noted that one learns quite a bit about woodworking as well as magic from the story.

Hellflower Power

Hellflower
By Eluki bes Shahar
DAW, $3.99 (paper)

I don't quite know what to call this book. Back in mid-century, it would have been "snappy." A decade or so later, "jazzy" would have applied. In this age, when cleverness and quick wit are almost unknown quantities (Ogden Nash would never get published nowadays), and it's chic (pronounce that "chick") to be thick, there seem to be no words of praise for those qualities. So let's be retro and say it's snazzy, rakish, and hip. One might also be more recently retro and say it has a certain relation to cyberpunk, but there's one huge difference—this novel has a hell of a sense of humor.

It takes place in one of those interstellar futures populated entirely by criminals, adolescents, and genetically modified humans (or aliens—it's sometimes hard to tell the diff)—some characters being all three. It's told in the first (female) person by one Saint Butterflies-are-free Peace Sincere, a self-described "sober, sane, sensible member of the highly-respectable community of interstellar smugglers." Butterfly uses "patwa," a futuristic lingo in which Shahar manages the minor miracle of being original, comprehensible and funny.

There are two other major characters in the novel. One is Paladin,

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Library Main Bank Seven of the Federation University Library at Sikander Prime. To simplify life, let's say that Paladin is a really super artificial intelligence, and the last of his/its kind, since a millennium ago, one gathers, a war was fought between his/its "relatives" and humanity. So Libraries are strictly no-nos to possess in the decaying Phoenix Empire of the setting. Butterfly has discovered and revived Paladin far afield on one of her less legal expeditions before the narrative of this novel begins, and the two have established a curious symbiosis cum friendship. Paladin's existence cannot be revealed at all in the semitechnophobic culture now extant. (Paladin also adds his own version of events, in non-patwa, every few chapters, which helps.)

Main character number three is a young man whom Butterfly rescues from a gang attack on the planet Wanderweb. Having done so, she discovers that she has picked herself a hellflower. The Honorable *Puer* Walks-by-Night Kennor's-son Starbringer Amrath Valijon of Chernbereth-Molkath is a noble of the mercenary culture of the hellflower alMayne, who have their own branch of the Mercenaries' Guild and will win any fight they start—"or just kill you in the middle of a pleasant conversation for no reason your survivors can see . . ." They have a system of "honor" which makes Bushido look like the rules and regulations for a 1960's be-in. The reasons *why* Butterfly steps into this fight (which it doesn't look like the Honorable *will* win) are several: the attacker is an old enemy; he and his friends make it seven to one; and Butterfly lets it slip out slowly that she fancies the hellflower, who is something of a blond hunk (a nicely thrown away sex-change on the old damsel-in-distress plot starter). It of course turns out that he is the Third Person of House Starborn, only fourteen years old (hellflowers are genetically mature earlier than most human species) and already up to his ears in interstellar intrigue.

The adventures of Butterfly, Tiggy (which Butterfly insists on dubbing him), and Paladin, who, of course, must remain undetected at the peril of his existence, are one long riotous romp, complete with thrills, chills, and even laughter. The author makes Butterfly a very funny lady indeed ("I was fourteen once, but I got over it") and all three characters are great company.

Cygneture Style

The Sorceress and the Cygnet
By Patricia A. McKillip
Ace, $17.95

With the exception of her "Riddlemaster" trilogy, Patricia McKillip's work has always had the signature quality of legend or folktale, which has its advantages and its disadvantages. It often makes for an infuriating mixture of the arbitrary and the opaque in the story and setting, while at the same time releasing some lovely conceits that would probably not come through in a more structured, "realistic" style.

Her latest, *The Sorceress and the Cygnet,* is no different. Corleu of the Wayfolk, a Gypsylike culture, gets all involved with the folklore and the constellations of his people

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when the Wayfolk are captured by the Gold King. To free them, he must get the heart of the Cygnet, which means offering the Blind Lady (who makes the Ring of Time) that which is on a peacock's feather. *She* in turn then tells him to wake the Dancer at the top of the world—who may know (what?—I'm not sure at this point)—but be certain and offer fire to the fire bear. This in turn leads to . . .

You get the idea. Balancing this quest is Corleu's accidental involvement with Nyx Ro, the Holder of Ro's sorceress daughter, who, while studying various sorts of sorcery, has absented herself from her family and the man who loves her for nine years.

McKillip's characters are often three dimensional, but the story too often lacks a second and first dimension, i.e., a line and a point. Nevertheless, page by page, incident by incident, there is much invention and wonder to be found here, and the story is worth reading just for the description of Nyx Ro's house, which is a place of endless rooms of strange and wonderful diversity that are forever changing places.

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc. . . . Well, here's an original, that's for sure. *Sacred Visions,* edited by Andrew M. Greeley and Michael Cassutt, is an anthology of SF with Catholic background or themes. It includes the original novelette of Walter R. Miller's "A Canticle For Leibowitz," as well as stories by Blish, Lafferty, Wolfe, McDevitt, et al. Needless to say, Clarke's "The Star" is not present. (Tor, $22.95 hardcover, $12.95 paper.)

Sequels, prequels, series and whatnot . . . Tom De Haven's *The End-of-Everything Man* is a sequel to *Walker of Worlds*, the second of the "Chronicles of the King's Tramp." (Doubleday, $20 hardcover, $15 paper.)

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Eighth Annual Collection* edited by Gardner Dozois (St. Martin's, $27.95 hardcover, $15.95 paper). ●

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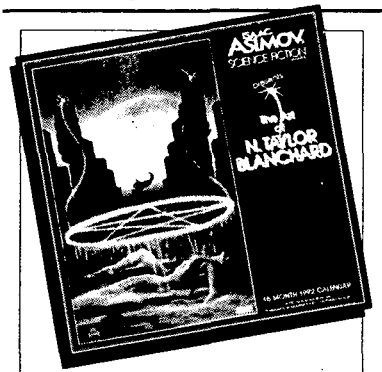
THE CALENDAR FOR 1992



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

October and November are busy months for con(vention)s. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, enclose an SASE. When calling, say why right off. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, playing a musical keyboard.

OCTOBER 1991

18–20—**MileHiCon.** For info, write: **Box 27074, Denver CO 80277.** Or phone: **(303) 985-8569** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Lakewood CO (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Sheraton. Guests will include: Sheri S. Tepper, Connie Willis, KathE Walker. Robot competition.

18–20—**NotJustAnotherCon. (413) 545-1924.** At U. Mass. Campus Center Hotel, Amherst MA. Brust.

18–20—**Tales from the Floating Vagabond. (301) 997-9581.** Columbia (MD) Inn. A role-playing game.

25–27—**MapleCon. (613) 235-0771.** Ottawa ON. Returning after a couple of years of difficulties.

25–27—**MasqueCon. (602) 266-8192.** Crescent Hotel, Phoenix AZ. A Beauty & the Beast convention.

25–27—**SoupÇon.** Hôtel de France, St. Helier, Jersey, Channel Islands (UK). A low-key relaxacon.

25–27—**Fanderson.** Hilton International, Leeds UK. For fans of Gerry (Space: 1999, etc.) Anderson.

31–Nov. 3—**World Fantasy Con, Box 27201, Tempe AZ 85285. (602) 470-0494.** Tucson AZ. H. Ellison.

NOVEMBER 1991

8–10—**SciCon, Box 9434, Hampton VA 23670. (804) 591-2361, 595-9005.** Virginia Beach VA.

8–10—**WindyCon, Box 432, Chicago IL 60690.** At the Hyatt in Schaumburg IL. M. Resnick, Effinger.

8–10—**OryCon, Box 5703, Portland OR 97228. (503) 283-0802 or 693-1739.** Emma Bull, Will Shetterley.

15–17—**PhilCon, Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101. (215) 342-1672 or 563-1705 or 739-9045.** Brin.

15–17—**British Fantasy Con, 15 Stanley Rd. Morden SM4 5DE, UK. (081) 540-9443.** London UK.

22–24—**BeNeLuxCon, Van Eeghenstraat 93, Amsterdam 1071, Netherlands.** They survived WorldCon.

22–24—**SoonerCon, Box 1701, Bethany OK 73008. (405) 769-4417.** Oklahoma City OK. Powers, Burke.

29–Dec. 1—**LosCon, 11513 Burbank Blvd., N. Hollywood CA 91601. (818) 760-9234.** Pasadena CA.

SEPTEMBER 1992

3–7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 859-8421.** The World SF Con. $85 to 9/30/91.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2–6—**ConFrancisco, Box 22097, San Francisco CA 94122.** (916) 349-1670. WorldCon. $70 thru 1991.

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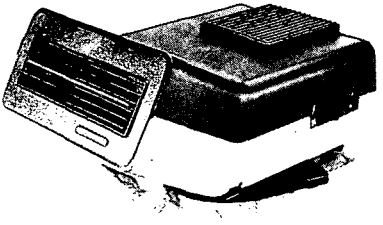

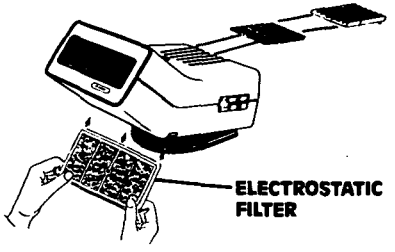

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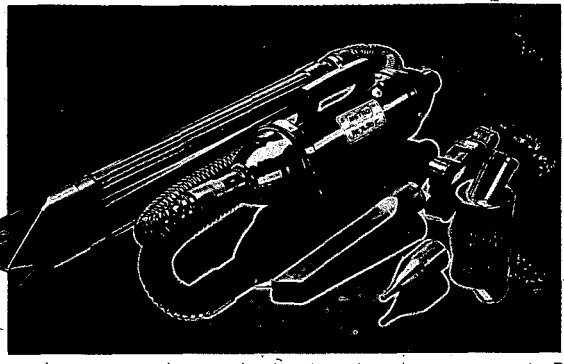

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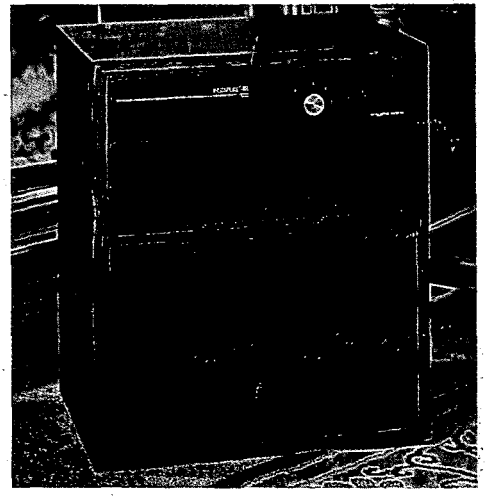

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